

Coming Attraction: Lunatic Loose in West Wing

As Uber-Hawk John Bolton prepares to take over as national security adviser on Monday, Ray McGovern looks back at when Bolton was one of the “crazies” in the George W. Bush administration.

By Ray McGovern *Special to Consortium News*

John Bolton’s March 22 appointment-by-tweet as President Donald Trump’s national security adviser has given “March Madness” a new and ominous meaning. There is less than a week left to batten down the hatches before Bolton makes U.S. foreign policy worse than it already is.

During a recent interview with *The Intercept*’s Jeremy Scahill (minutes 35 to 51) I mentioned that Bolton fits seamlessly into a group of take-no-prisoners zealots once widely known in Washington circles as “the crazies,” and now more commonly referred to as “neocons.”

Beginning in the 1970s, “the crazies” sobriquet was applied to Cold Warriors hell bent on bashing Russians, Chinese, Arabs – anyone who challenged U.S. “exceptionalism” (read hegemony). More to the point, I told Scahill that President (and former CIA Director) George H. W. Bush was among those using the term freely, since it seemed so apt. I have been challenged to prove it.

I don’t make stuff up. And with the appointment of the certifiable Bolton, the “the crazies” have become far more than an historical footnote. Rather, the crucible that Bush-41 and other reasonably moderate policymakers endured at their hands give the experience major relevance today. Thus, I am persuaded it would be best not to ask people simply to take my word for it when I refer to “the crazies,” their significance, and the differing attitudes the two Bushes had toward them.

George H. W. Bush and I had a longstanding professional and, later, cordial relationship. For many years after he stopped being president, we stayed in touch – mostly by letter. This is the first time I have chosen to share any of our personal correspondence. I do so not only because of the ominous importance of Bolton’s appointment, but also because I am virtually certain the elder Bush would want me to.

Scanned below is a note George H. W. Bush sent me eight weeks before his son, egged on by the same “crazies” his father knew well from earlier incarnations, launched an illegal and unnecessary war for regime change in Iraq – unleashing

chaos in the Middle East.

1-22-03

GEORGE BUSH

Dear Ray,

It is only "meet and right" that you speak out.

Thanks for your letter. Please do not worry that "crazies" have any influence on POTUS 43. I will admit that early reporting indicated that but it was not true then nor is it true now.

Shut Out of the Media

By January 2003, it was clear that Bush-43 was about to launch a war of aggression – the crime defined by the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunal as “the supreme international crime differing from other war crimes only in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” (Think torture, for example.) During most of 2002, several of us former intelligence analysts had been comparing notes, giving one another sanity checks, writing op-eds pointing to the flimsiness of the “intelligence” cobbled together to allege a weapons-of-mass-destruction “threat” from Iraq, and warning of the catastrophe that war on Iraq would bring.

Except for an occasional op-ed wedged into the Christian Science Monitor or the Miami Herald, for example, we were ostracized from “mainstream media.” *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were on a feeding frenzy from the government trough and TV pundits were getting high ratings by beating the drum for war. Small wonder the entire media was allergic to what we were saying, despite our many years of experience in intelligence analysis. Warnings to slow down and think were the last thing wanted by those already profiteering from a war on the near horizon.

The challenge we faced was how to get through to President George W. Bush. It had become crystal clear that the only way to do that would be to do an end run around “the crazies” – the criminally insane advisers that his father knew so well – Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of State John Bolton.

Bolton: One of the Crazies

John Bolton was Cheney’s “crazy” at the State Department. Secretary Colin Powell was pretty much window dressing. He could be counted on not to complain loudly – much less quit – even if he strongly suspected he was being had. Powell had gotten to where he was by saluting sharply and doing what superiors told him to do. As secretary of state, Powell was not crazy – just craven. He enjoyed more credibility than the rest of the gang and rather than risk being ostracized like the rest of us, he sacrificed that credibility on the altar of the “supreme international crime.”

In those days Bolton did not hesitate to run circles around – and bully – the secretary of state and many others. This must be considered a harbinger of things to come, starting on Monday, when the bully comes to the china shop in the West Wing. While longevity in office is not the

hallmark of the Trump administration, even if Bolton’s tenure turns out to be short-lived, the crucial months immediately ahead will provide Bolton with ample opportunity to wreak the kind of havoc that “the crazies” continue to see as enhancing U.S. – and not incidentally – Israeli influence in the Middle East. Bear in mind, Bolton still says the attack on Iraq was a good idea. And he is out to scuttle the landmark agreement that succeeded in preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon any time soon.

Trying to Head Off War

In August 2002, as the Bush-43 administration and U.S. media prepared the country for war on Iraq, the elder Bush’s national security advisor, Gen. Brent Scowcroft, and Secretary of State James Baker each wrote op-eds in an attempt to wean the younger Bush off the “crazies’” milk. Scowcroft’s *Wall Street Journal* op-ed of August 15 was as blunt as its title, “Don’t Attack Saddam.” The cautionary thrust of Baker’s piece in the *New York Times* ten days later, was more diplomatic but equally clear.

But these interventions, widely thought to have been approved by Bush-41, had a predictable opposite effect on the younger Bush, determined as he was to become the “first war president of the 21st Century” (his words). It is a safe bet also that Cheney and other “crazies” baited him with, “Are you going to let

Daddy, who doesn't respect ANY of us, tell you what to do?"

All attempts to insert a rod into the wheels of the juggernaut heading downhill toward war were looking hopeless, when a new idea occurred. Maybe George H. W. Bush could get through to his son. What's to lose? On January 11, 2003 I wrote a letter to the elder Bush asking him to speak "privately to your son George about the crazies advising him on Iraq," adding "I am aghast at the cavalier way in which the [Richard] Perles of the Pentagon are promoting the use of nuclear weapons as an acceptable option against Iraq."

My letter continued: "That such people have the President's ear is downright scary. I think he needs to know why you exercised such care to keep such folks at arms length. (And, as you may know, they are exerting unrelenting pressure on CIA analysts to come up with the "right" answers. You know how that goes!)"

In the letter I enclosed a handful of op-eds that I had managed to get past 2nd-tier mainstream media censors. In those writings, I was much more pointed in my criticism of the Bush/Cheney administration's approach to Iraq than Scowcroft and Baker had been in August 2002.

Initially, I was encouraged at the way the elder Bush began his January 22, 2003 note to me: "It is only 'meet and right' that you speak out." As I read on, however, I asked myself how he could let the wish be father to the thought, so to speak. (Incidentally, "POTUS" in his note is the acronym for "President of the United States;" number 43, of course, was George Jr.)

The elder Bush may not have been fully conscious of it, but he was whistling in the dark, having long since decided to leave to surrogates like Scowcroft and Baker the task of highlighting publicly the criminal folly of attacking Iraq. The father may have tried privately; who knows. It was, in my view, a tragedy that he did not speak out publicly. He would have been very well aware that this was the only thing that would have had a chance of stopping his son from committing what the Nuremberg Tribunal defined as "the supreme international crime."

It is, of course, difficult for a father to admit that his son fell under the influence – this time not alcohol or drugs, but rather the at least equally noxious demonic influence of "the crazies," which Billy Graham himself might have found beyond his power to exorcise. Maybe it is partly because I know the elder Bush personally, but it does strike me that, since we are all human, some degree of empathy might be in order. I simply cannot imagine what it must be like to be a former President with a son, also a former President, undeniably responsible for such widespread killing, injury and abject misery.

Speaking Out – Too Late

It was a dozen years too late, but George H.W. Bush finally did give voice to his doubts about the wisdom of rushing into the Iraq War. In Jon Meacham's biography, "Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush," the elder Bush puts most of the blame for Iraq on his son's "iron-ass" advisers, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, while at the same time admitting where the buck stops. With that Watergate-style "modified, limited hangout," and his (richly deserved) criticism of his two old nemeses, Bush-41 may be able to live more comfortably with himself, hoping to get beyond what I believe must be his lingering regret at not going public when that might have stopped "arrogant" Rumsfeld and "hardline" Cheney from

inflicting their madness on the Middle East. No doubt he is painfully aware that he was one of the very few people who might have been able to stop the chaos and carnage, had he spoken out publicly.

Bush-41's not-to-worry note to me had the opposite effect with those of us CIA alumni alarmed at the gathering storm and the unconscionable role being played by those of our former CIA colleagues still there in manufacturing pre-Iraq-war "intelligence." We could see what was going on in real time; we did not have to wait five years for the bipartisan conclusions of a five-year Senate Intelligence Committee investigation. Introducing its findings, Chairman Jay Rockefeller said: "In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent."

Back to January 2003: a few days after I received President Bush's not-to-worry note of January 22, 2003, a handful of us former senior CIA officials went forward with plans to create Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPs). We had been giving one another sanity checks before finalizing draft articles about the scarcely believable things we were observing – including unmistakable signs that our profession of intelligence analysis was being prostituted. On the afternoon of February 5, 2003, after Powell misled the UN Security Council, we issued our first (of three) VIPs Memoranda for the President before the war. We graded Powell "C" for content, and warned President George W. Bush, in effect, to beware "the crazies," closing with these words:

"After watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic."

Team B

When Gerald Ford assumed the presidency in August 1974, the White House was a center of intrigue. Serving as Chief of Staff for President Ford, Donald Rumsfeld (1974-75), with help from Dick Cheney (1975-76), engineered Bush's nomination to become CIA Director. This was widely seen as a cynical move to take Bush out of contention for the Republican ticket in 1976 and possibly beyond, since the post of CIA director was regarded as a dead-end job and, ideally, would keep you out of politics. (Alas, this did not turn out the way Rumsfeld expected – damn those “unknown unknowns.”)

If, at the same time, Rumsfeld and Cheney could brand GHW Bush soft on communism and brighten the future for the Military-Industrial Complex, that would put icing on the cake. Rumsfeld had been making evidence-impooverished speeches at the time, arguing that the Soviets were ignoring

the AMB Treaty and other arms control arrangements and were secretly building up to attack the United States. He and the equally relentless Paul Wolfowitz were doing all they could to create a much more alarming picture of the Soviet Union, its intentions, and its views about fighting and winning a nuclear war. Sound familiar?

Bush arrived at CIA after U.S.-Soviet detente had begun to flourish. The cornerstone Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty was almost four years old and had introduced the somewhat mad but stabilizing reality of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Crazies and neocons alike lived in desperate fear of losing their favorite enemy, the USSR. Sound familiar?

Bush was CIA Director for the year January 1976 to January 1977, during which I worked directly for him. At the time, I was Acting National Intelligence Officer for Western Europe where post-WWII certainties were unravelling and it was my job to get intelligence community-wide assessments to the White House – often on fast breaking events. We almost wore out what was then the latest technology – the “LDX” (for Long Distance Xerography) machine – sending an unprecedentedly high number of “Alert Memoranda” from CIA Headquarters to the White House. (“LDX,” of course, is now fax; there was no Internet.)

As ANIO, I also chaired National Intelligence Estimates on Italy and Spain. As far as I could observe from that senior post, Director Bush honored his incoming pledge not to put any political gloss on the judgments of intelligence analysts.

Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, of course, had made no such pledge. They persuaded President Ford to set up a “Team B” analysis, contending that CIA and intelligence community analyses and estimates were naively rosy. Bush's predecessor as CIA director, William Colby, had turned the proposal down flat, but he had no political ambitions. I suspect Bush, though, saw a Rumsfeld trap

to color him soft on the USSR. In any case, against the advice of virtually all intelligence professionals, Bush succumbed to the political pressure and acquiesced in the establishment of a Team B to do alternative analyses. No one was surprised that these painted a much more threatening and inaccurate picture of Soviet strategic intentions.

Paul Warnke, a senior official of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency at the time of Team B, put it this way:

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“Whatever might be said for evaluation of strategic capabilities by a group of outside experts, the impracticality of achieving useful results by ‘independent’ analysis of strategic objectives should have been self-evident. Moreover, the futility of the Team B enterprise was assured by the selection of the panel’s members. Rather than including a diversity of views ... the Strategic Objectives Panel was composed entirely of individuals who made careers of viewing the Soviet menace with alarm.”

The fact that Team B’s conclusions were widely regarded as inaccurate did not deter Rumsfeld. He went about promoting them as valid and succeeded in undermining arms control efforts for the next several years. Two days before Jimmy Carter’s inauguration Rumsfeld fired his parting shot, saying, “No doubt exists about the capabilities of the Soviet armed forces” and that those capabilities “indicate a tendency toward war fighting ... rather than the more modish Western models of deterrence through mutual vulnerability.”

GHW Bush in the White House

When George H. W. Bush came into town as vice president, he got President Reagan’s permission to be briefed with “The President’s Daily Brief” and I became a daily briefer from 1981 to 1985. That job was purely substantive. Even so, my colleagues and I have been very careful to regard those conversations as sacrosanct, for obvious reasons. By the time he became president in 1989, he had come to know, all too well, “the crazies” and what they were capable of. Bush’s main political nemesis, Donald Rumsfeld, could be kept at bay, and other “crazies” kept out of the most senior posts – until Bush the younger put them in positions in which they could do serious damage. John Bolton had been *enfant terrible* on arms control, persuading Bush-43 to ditch the ABM Treaty. On Monday, he can be expected to arrive at the West Wing with his wrecking ball.

Even Jimmy Carter Speaks Out

Given how difficult Rumsfeld and other hardliners made it for President Carter to work with the Russians on arms control, and the fact that Bolton

has been playing that role more recently, Jimmy Carter's comments on Bolton – while unusually sharp – do not come as a complete surprise. Besides, experience has certainly shown how fo

olish it can be to dismiss out of hand what former presidents say about their successors' appointments to key national security positions. This goes in spades in the case of John Bolton.

Just three days after Bolton's appointment, the normally soft-spoken Jimmy Carter became plain-spoken/outspoken Jimmy Carter, telling USA Today that the selection of Bolton "is a disaster for our country." When asked what advice he would give Trump on North Korea, for example, Carter said his "first advice" would be to fire Bolton.

In sum, if you asked Bush-41, Carter's successor as president, how he would describe John Bolton, I am confident he would lump Bolton together with those he called "the crazies" back in the day, referring to headstrong ideologues adept at blowing things up – things like arms agreements negotiated with painstaking care, giving appropriate consideration to the strategic views of adversaries and friends alike. Sadly, "crazy" seems to have become the new normal in Washington, with warmongers and regime-changers like Bolton in charge, people who have not served a day in uniform and have no direct experience of war other than starting them.

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Russia 'Novichok' Hysteria Proves Politicians and Media Haven't Learned the Lessons of Iraq

The current state of anti-Russia hysteria is reminiscent of earlier dark chapters of American history, including the rush to war in Iraq of the early 2000s and McCarthyism of the 1950s, Patrick Henningsen observes.

By Patrick Henningsen

If there's one thing to be gleaned from the current atmosphere of anti-Russian hysteria in the West, it's that the US-led sustained propaganda campaign is starting to pay dividends. It's not only the hopeless political classes and media miscreants who believe that Russia is hacking, meddling and poisoning our progressive democratic utopia – with many pinning their political careers to this by now that's it's too late for them to turn back.

As it was with Iraq in 2003, these dubious public figures require a degree of public support for their policies, and unfortunately many people do believe in the grand *Russian conspiracy*, having been sufficiently brow-beaten into submission by around-the-clock fear mongering and official fake news disseminated by government and the mainstream media.

What makes this latest carnival of warmongering more frightening is that it proves that the political and media classes never actually learned or internalized the basic lessons of Iraq, namely that the cessation of diplomacy and the declarations of sanctions (a prelude to war) against another sovereign state should not be based on half-baked intelligence and mainstream fake news. But that's exactly what is happening with this latest Russian 'Novichok' plot.

Admittedly, the stakes are much higher this time around. The worst case scenario is unthinkable, whereby the bad graces of men like John Bolton and other military zealots, there may just be a thin enough mandate to short-sell another military conflagration or proxy war – this time against another nuclear power and UN Security Council member.

Enter stage right, where US President Donald Trump announced this week that the US is moving closer to war footing with Russia. It's not the first time Trump has made such a hasty move in the absence any forensic evidence of a crime. Nowadays, hearsay, conjecture and social media postings are enough to declare war. Remember last April with the alleged "Sarin Attack" in Khan Sheikhoun, when the embattled President squeezed off 59 Tomahawk Cruise missiles against Syria – a decision, which as far as anyone can tell, was based solely on a few YouTube videos uploaded by the illustrious White Helmets. Back then Trump learned how an act of war against an existential enemy could take the heat off at home and translate into a bounce in the polls. Even *La Résistance* at CNN were giddy with excitement and threw their support behind Trump, with some pundits describing his decision to act as "presidential."

As with past high-profile western-led WMD allegations against governments in Syria and Iraq (the US and UK are patently unconcerned with multiple allegations of 'rebel' terrorists in Syria caught using chemical weapons), an identical progression of events appears to be unfolding following the alleged 'Novichok' chemical weapon poisoning of retired British-Russian double agent Sergei

Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, Wiltshire on March 4.

Despite a lack of evidence presented to the public other than the surreptitious “highly likely” assessments of British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, President Trump once again has caved into pressure from Official Washington’s anti-Russian party line and ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats – whom he accused of being spies. Trump also ordered the closure of the Russian consulate in Seattle, citing speculative fears that Russia might be spying on a nearby Boeing submarine development base. It was the second round of US expulsions of Russian officials, with the first one ordered by the outgoing President Obama in December 2016, kicking out 35 Russian diplomats and their families (including their head chef) and closing the Russian Consulate in San Francisco, with some calling it “a den of spies”.

Trump’s move followed an earlier UK action on March 14th, which expelled 23 Russian diplomats also accused of being spies. This was in retaliation for the alleged poisoning of a retired former Russian-British double agent in Salisbury, England.

The ‘Collective’ Concern

It’s important to understand how this week’s brash move by Washington was coordinated in advance. The US and the UK are relying on their other NATO partners, including Germany, Poland, Italy, Canada, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Estonia and Lithuania – to create the image of a united front against perceived ‘Russian aggression.’ As with multilateral military operations, multilateral diplomatic measures like this are not carried out on a whim.

Aside from this, there are two seriously worrying aspects of this latest US-led multilateral move against Russia. Firstly, this diplomatic offensive against Russia mirrors a NATO collective defense action, and by doing so, it tacitly signals towards an invocation of Article 5. According to AP, one German spokesperson called it a matter of ‘solidarity’ with the UK. Statements from the White House are no less encouraging:

“The United States takes this action in conjunction with our NATO allies, and partners around the world in response with Russia’s use of a military grade chemical weapon on the soil of the United Kingdom – the latest in its ongoing pattern of destabilizing activities around the world,” the White House said. “Today’s actions make the United States safer by reducing Russia’s ability to spy on Americans, and to conduct covert operations that threaten America’s national security.”

What this statement indicates is that any Russian foreign official or overseas worker in the West should be regarded as possible agents of espionage. In other words, the Cold War is now officially back on.

Then came this statement: "With these steps, the United States and our allies and partners make clear to Russia that its actions have consequences."

In an era of power politics, this language is anything but harmless. And while US and UK politicians and media pundits seem to be treating it all as a school yard game at times, we should all be reminded that this is how wars start.

The second issue with the Trump's diplomatic move against Russia is that it extends beyond the territorial US – and into what should be regarded as the neutral zone of the United Nations. As part of the group of 60 expulsions, the US has expelled 12 Russian diplomats from the United Nations in New York City. While this may mean nothing to jumped-up political appointees like Nikki Haley who routinely threaten the UN when a UNGA vote doesn't go her way, this is an extremely dangerous precedent because it means that the US has now created a diplomatic trap door where legitimate international relations duties are being carelessly rebranded as *espionage* – done on a whim and based on no actual evidence.

By using this tactic, the US is casting aside decades of international resolutions, treaties and laws. Such a move directly threatens to undermine a fundamental principle of the United Nations which is its diplomatic mission and the right for every sovereign nation to have diplomatic representation. Without it, there is no UN forum and countries cannot talk through their differences and negotiate peaceful settlements. This is why the UN was founded in the first place. Someone might want to remind Nikki Haley of that.

On top of this, flippant US and UK officials are already crowing that Russia should be kicked off the UN Security Council. In effect, Washington is trying to cut the legs out from a fellow UN Security Council member and a nuclear power. This UNSC exclusion campaign has been gradually building up since 2014, where US officials have been repeatedly blocked by Russia over incidents in Syria and the Ukraine. Hence, Washington and its partners are frustrated with the UN framework, and that's probably why they are so actively undermining it.

Those boisterous calls, as irrational and ill-informed as they might be, should be taken seriously because as history shows, these signs are a prelude to war.

Also, consider the fact that both the US and Russia have military assets deployed in Syria. How much of the Skripal case and the subsequent fall-out has to do with the fact that US Coalition and Gulf state proxy terrorists have lost

their hold over key areas in Syria? The truly dangerous part of this equation is that the illegal military occupation by the US and its NATO ally Turkey of northeastern Syria is in open violation of international law, and so Washington and its media arms would like nothing more than to be history's actor and bury its past indiscretions under a new layer of US-Russia tension in the Middle East.

Another WMD Debacle?

Is it really possible to push East-West relations over the edge on the basis of anecdotal evidence?

Former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, highlighted the recent British High Court judgement which states in writing that the government's own chemical weapons experts from the Porton Down research facility could not categorically confirm that a Russian 'Novichok' nerve agent was actually used in the Salisbury incident. Based on this, Murray believes that both British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, and Britain's deputy UN representative Jonathan Allen – have all lied to the public and the world when making their public statements that the Russians had in fact launched a deadly chemical weapons attack on UK soil. Murray states elaborates on this key point:

"This sworn Court evidence direct from Porton Down is utterly incompatible with what Boris Johnson has been saying. The truth is that Porton Down have not even positively identified this as a 'Novichok', as opposed to "a closely related agent". Even if it were a 'Novichok' that would not prove manufacture in Russia, and a 'closely related agent' could be manufactured by literally scores of state and non-state actors.

"This constitutes irrefutable evidence that the government have been straight out lying – to Parliament, to the EU, to NATO, to the United Nations, and above all to the people – about their degree of certainty of the origin of the attack. It might well be an attack originating in Russia, but there are indeed other possibilities and investigation is needed. As the government has sought to whip up jingoistic hysteria in advance of forthcoming local elections, the scale of the lie has daily increased."

Murray has been roundly admonished by the UK establishment for his views, but he is still correct to ask the question: how could UK government leaders have known 'who did it' in advance of any criminal forensic investigation or substantive testing by Porton Down or an independent forensic investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)?

One would hope we could all agree that it's this sort of question which should

have been given more prominence in the run-up to the Iraq War. In matters of justice and jurisprudence, that's a fundamental question and yet, once again – it has been completely bypassed.

Murray is not alone. A number of scientists and journalists have openly questioned the UK's hyperbolic claims that Russia had ordered a 'chemical attack' on British soil. In her recent report for the New Scientist, author Debora MacKenzie reiterates the fact that several countries could have manufactured a 'Novichok' class nerve agent and used it in the chemical attack on Russians Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury.

"British Prime Minister Theresa May says that because it was Russia that developed Novichok agents, it is 'highly likely' that Russia either attacked the Skripals itself, or lost control of its Novichok to someone else who did. But other countries legally created Novichok for testing purposes after its existence was revealed in 1992, and a production method has even been published."

The New Scientist also quotes Ralf Trapp, a chemical weapons consultant formerly with the OPCW, who also reiterates a point worth reminding readers of – that inspectors are only able to tell where molecules sampled in Salisbury have come from if they have reference samples for the ingredients used.

"I doubt they have reference chemicals for forensic analysis related to Russian CW agents," says Trapp. "But if Russia has nothing to hide they may let inspectors in."

Even if they can identify it as Novichok, they cannot say that it came from Russia, or was ordered by the Russian government, not least of all because the deadly recipe is available on Amazon for only \$28.45.

It should be noted that a substantial amount of evidence points to only two countries who are the most active in producing and testing biological and chemical weapons WMD – the United States and Great Britain. Their programs also include massive 'live testing' on both humans and animals with most of this work undertaken at the Porton Down research facility located only minutes away from the scene of this alleged 'chemical attack' in Salisbury, England.

Problems with the Official Story

If we put aside for the moment any official UK government theory, which is based on speculation backed-up by a series of hyperbolic statements and proclamations of Russian guilt, there are still many fundamental problems with the official story – maybe too many to list here, but I will address what I believe are a few key items of interest.

The UK police have now released a statement claiming that the alleged 'Novichok' nerve agent was somehow administered at the front door of Sergie Skripal's home in Wiltshire. This latest official claim effectively negates the previous official story because it means that the Skripals would have been exposed at home at the latest around 13:00 GMT on March 4th, and then drove into town, parking their car at Sainsbury's car park, then having a leisurely walk to have drinks at The Mill Pub, before ordering and eating lunch at Zizzis restaurant, and then finally leaving the Zizzis and walking before finally retiring on a park bench – where emergency services were apparently called at 16:15 GMT to report an incident.

Soon after, local police arrived on the scene to find the Skripals on the bench in an "extremely serious condition." Based on this story, the Skripals would have been going about their business for 3 hours before finally falling prey to the deadly WMD 'Novichok'. From this, one would safely conclude that whatever has poisoned the pair was neither lethal *nor* could it have been a military grade WMD. Even by subtracting the home doorway exposure leg of this story, the government's claim hardly adds up – as even a minor amount of any real lethal military grade WMD would have effected many more people along this timeline of events. Based on what we know so far, it seems much more plausible that the pair would have been poisoned at Zizzis restaurant, and not with a military grade nerve agent.

When this story initially broke, we were also told that the attending police officer who first arrived on the scene of this incident, Wiltshire Police Detective Sgt. Nick Bailey – was "fighting for his life" after being exposed to the supposed 'deadly Russian nerve agent'. As it turned out, officer Bailey was treated in hospital and then discharged on March 22, 2018. To our knowledge, no information or photos of Bailey's time in care are available to the public so we cannot know the trajectory of his health, or if he was even exposed to the said "Novichok".

In the immediate aftermath, the public were also told initially that approximately 40 people were taken into medical care because of "poison exposure". This bogus claim was promulgated by some mainstream media outlets, like Rupert Murdoch's Times newspaper. In reality, no one showed signs of "chemical weapons" exposure, meaning that this story was just another example of mainstream corporate media fake news designed to stoke tension and fear in the public. We exposed this at the time on the UK Column News here:

To further complicate matters, this week we were told that Yulia Skripal has now turned the corner and is in recovery, and is speaking to police from her hospital bed. If this is true, then it further proves that whatever the alleged

poison agent was which the Skripals were exposed to – it was not a lethal, military grade nerve agent. If it had been, then most likely the Skripals and many others would not be alive right now.

Unfortunately, in this new age of state secrecy, we can expect that most of the key information relating to this case may be sealed indefinitely under a national security letter. In the case of Porton Down scientist David Kelly, the key information is sealed (hidden) for another 60+ years (if we're lucky, we might get to see it in the year 2080). This means that we just have to take their word for it, or to borrow the words of the newly crowned UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson – any one asking questions, “should just go away and shut up.” Such is the lack of decorum and transparency in this uncomfortably Orwellian atmosphere.

While Britain insists that it has ‘irrefutable proof’ that Russia launched a deadly nerve-gas attack to murder the Skripals, the facts simply do not match-up to the rhetoric.

The Litvinenko Conspiracy

It's important to note that as far as public perceptions are concerned, the official Skripal narrative has been built directly on top of the Litvinenko case.

In order to try and reinforce the government's speculative arguments, the UK establishment has resurrected the trial-by-media case of another Russian defector, former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko, who is said to have died after being poisoned with radioactive polonium-210 in his tea at a restaurant in London's Mayfair district in late 2006.

Despite not having any actual evidence as to who committed the crime, the British authorities and the mainstream media have upheld an almost religious belief that the Russian FSB (formerly KGB), under the command of Vladimir Putin, had ordered the alleged radioactive poisoning of Litvinenko.

The media mythos was reinforced in 2016, when a British Public Inquiry headed by Sir Robert Owen accused senior Russian officials of ‘probably having motives to approve the murder’ of Litvinenko. Again, this level of guesswork and speculation would never meet the standard of an actual forensic investigation worthy of a real criminal court of law, but so far as apportioning blame to another nation or head of state is concerned – it seems fair enough for British authorities.

Following the completion of the inquiry, Sir Robert had this to say: “Taking full account of all the evidence and analysis available to me, I find that the

FSB operation to kill Litvinenko was probably approved by Mr Patrushev and also by President Putin.”

Contrary to consensus reality (popular belief), Owen’s inquiry was not at all definitive. Quite the opposite in fact, and in many ways it mirrors how the Skripal case has been presented to the public. Despite offering no evidence of any criminal guilt, Owen’s star chamber maintained that Vladimir Putin “probably” approved the operation to assassinate Litvinenko. Is “probably” really enough to assign guilt in a major international crime? When it comes to high crimes of state, the answer seems to be yes.

According to Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, that UK inquiry was “neither transparent nor public” and was “conducted mostly behind doors, with classified documents and unnamed witnesses contributing to the result...”

Zakharova highlighted the fact that two key witnesses in the case – Litvinenko’s chief patron, a UK-based anti-Putin defector billionaire oligarch named Boris Berezovsky, and the owner of Itsu restaurant in London’s Mayfair where the incident is said to have taken place, had both suddenly died under dubious circumstances.

The British authorities went on to accuse two Russian men in the Litvinenko murder – businessman Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitry Kovtun. Both have denied the accusations. Despite the lack of any real evidence, the United States Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control blacklisted both Lugovoi and Kovtun, as well as Russian persons Stanislav Gordievsky, Gennady Plaksin and Aleksandr I. Bastrykin – under the Magnitsky Act, which freezes their assets held in American financial institutions, and bans them from conducting any transactions or traveling to the United States.

Notice the familiar pattern: even if the case is inconclusive, or collapses due to a lack of evidence, the policies remain in place.

Despite all the pomp and circumstance however, Owen’s official conspiracy theory failed to sway even Litvinenko’s own close family members. While Litvinenko’s widow Marina maintains that it was definitely the Russian government who killed her husband, Aleksander’s younger brother Maksim Litvinenko, based in Rimini, Italy, believes the British report “ridiculous” to blame the Kremlin for the murder of his brother, stating that he believes British security services had more of a motive to carry out the assassination.

“My father and I are sure that the Russian authorities are not involved. It’s all a set-up to put pressure on the Russian government,” said Litvinenko to the

Mirror newspaper, and that such reasoning can explain why the UK waited almost 10 years to launch the inquiry his brother's death.

Maxim also said that Britain had more reason to kill his brother than the Russians, and believes that blaming Putin for the murder was part of a wider effort to smear Russia. Following the police investigation, Alexander's father Walter Litvinenko, also said that he had regretted blaming Putin and the Russian government for his son's death and did so under intense pressure at the time.

For anyone skeptical of the official proclamations of the British state and the mainstream media on the Litvinenko case, it's worth reading the work of British journalist Will Dunkerly here.

With so many questions hanging over the actual validity of the British state's accusations against Russia, it's somewhat puzzling that British police would say they are still 'looking for similarities' between the Skripal and Litvinenko cases in order to pinpoint a modus operandi.

The admission by the British law enforcement that their investigation may take months before any conclusion can be drawn also begs the question: how could May have been so certain so quick? The answer should be clear by now: she could not have known it was a 'Novichok' agent, no more than she could know the 'Russia did it.'

A Plastic Cold War

Historically speaking, in the absence of any real mandate or moral authority, governments suffering from an identity crisis, or a crisis of legitimacy will often try and define themselves not based on what they stand for, but rather what (or who) they are in opposition to. This profile suits both the US and UK perfectly at the moment.

Both governments are limping along with barely a mandate, and have orchestrated two of the worst and most hypocritical debacles in history with their illegal wars in both Syria and Yemen. With their moral high-ground a thing of the past, these two countries require a common existential enemy in order to give their international order legitimacy. The cheapest, easiest option is to reinvigorate a framework which was already there, which is the Cold War framework: *Reds under the bed. The Russian are coming, etc.*

It's cheap and it's easy because it has already been seeded with 70 years of Cold War propaganda and institutionalized racism in the West directed against Russians. If you don't believe me, just go look at some of the posters, watch the TV propaganda in the US, or read about the horrific McCarthyist blacklists and political witch hunts. I remember growing up in America and being taught

“never again” and “we’re past all of that now, those days of irrational paranoia are behind us, we’re better than that now.” But that madness of the past was not a fringe affair – it was a *mainstream* madness, and one which was actively promoted by government and mainstream media.

You would have to be at the pinnacle of ignorance to deny that this is exactly what we are seeing today, albeit a more plastic version, but just as immoral and dangerous. Neocons love it, and now liberals love it too.

Dutifully fanning the flaming of war, Theresa May has issued her approval of the NATO members diplomatic retaliation this week exclaiming, “We welcome today’s actions by our allies, which clearly demonstrate that we all stand shoulder to shoulder in sending the strongest signal to Russia that it cannot continue to flout international law.”

But from an international law perspective, can May’s ‘highly likely’ assurances really be enough to position the west on war footing with Russia? When Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn asked these same fundamental questions on March 14th, he was shouted down by the Tory bench, and also by the hawkish Blairites sitting behind him.



Afterwards, the British mainstream press launched yet another defamation campaign against Corbyn, this time with the UK’s Daily Mail calling the opposition leader a “Kremlin Stooge”, followed by British state broadcaster the BBC who went through the effort of creating a mock-up graphic of Corbyn in front of the Kremlin (pictured above) apparently wearing a Russian hat, as if to say he was a *Russian agent*. It was a new low point in UK politics and media.

Considering the mainstream media’s Corbyn smear alongside the recent insults hurled at Julian Assange by Tory MP Sir Alan Duncan who stood up in front of Parliament and called the Wikileaks founder a “miserable worm”, what this really says is that anyone who dares defy the official state narrative will be beaten down and publicly humiliated. In other words, dissent in the political ranks will not be tolerated. It’s almost as if we are approaching a one party state.

Would a UN Security Council member and nuclear power really be so brazen as to declare *de facto* war on another country without presenting any actual evidence or completing a genuine forensic investigation?

So why the apparent rush to war? Haven’t we been here before, in 2003? Will the

people of the West allow it to happen again?

As with Tony Blair's WMD's in 2003, the British public are meant to take it on faith and never question the official government line. And just like in 2003, the UK has opened the first door on the garden path, with the US and its 'coalition' following safely behind, *shoulder to shoulder*. In this latest version of the story, Tony Blair is being played by Theresa May, and Jack Straw is being played by Boris Johnson.

On the other side of the pond, a hapless Bush is hapless Trump. Both Blair and Straw, along with the court propagandist Alastair Campbell – are all proven to have been liars of the highest order, and if there were any real accountability or justice, these men and their collaborators in government should be in prison right now. The fact they aren't is why the door has been left wide open for the exact same scam to be repeated again, and again.

Iraq should have taught us all to be skeptical about official claims of chemical weapons evidence, and to face the ugly truth about how most major wars throughout history have waged by the deception – and by western governments. What does it tell us about today's society if people still cannot see this?

That's why it was wrong to let Blair, Bush and others off the hook for war crimes. By doing so, both the British and Americans are inviting a dark phase of history to repeat itself again, and again.

It's high time that we break the cycle.

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Questioning the Conventional Wisdom of Russian Spy's Poisoning

The recent poisoning of a Russian spy has started a tit-for-tat of expelling diplomats between the US and Russia, an escalation of tensions that deserves serious questioning, explained former ambassador Craig Murray in an interview with Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico.

By Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico

Former UK Ambassador Craig Murray found out very quickly what happens when one contradicts the conventional wisdom regarding the recent poisoning of former Russian spy and double agent Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia, in the English city of Salisbury on March 4.

Ambassador Murray, who in the following interview raises compelling questions about who may be responsible for the attacks, other than the Russians, has been the butt of a full-scale cyber attack on his website over many days.

Meanwhile, the usual suspects in the US and Western corporate press continue to fan the flames of a new cold war with Russia. Indeed, Russia will expel 60 US diplomats and has ordered the shuttering of the US consulate in St. Petersburg, according to an announcement by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Lavrov, who made the announcement in Moscow on Thursday, March 29, summoned US ambassador Jon Huntsman to the Russian Foreign Ministry to confirm the action.

Dennis J. Bernstein and Randy Credico interviewed Ambassador Murray on March 26th, 2018.

Dennis Bernstein: President Trump ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian officials from the United States and the closing of the Russian consulate in Seattle. The move follows the alleged poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury on March 4. Joining us is someone who knows a great deal about the matter and has come under fire for taking an oppositional position, former UK ambassador, author and activist, Craig Murray. Mr. Murray, everyone says the Russians did it, no doubt about it, but you disagree.

Craig Murray: I'm not saying the Russians didn't do it, I am saying there are other possibilities. We are not supposed to assign responsibility for crime in this way, saying there is a bad guy in the neighborhood and therefore it must be him. So far, there has been no real evidence at all that it was the Russian state that did it.

I find it remarkable that the very day this happened the British government was announcing that it was the Russian state that was behind this. They couldn't possibly have had time to analyze any of the evidence. It is as though this is being used as a trigger to put prearranged anti-Russian measures into place and to "up" the Cold War rhetoric. You can't help get the feeling that they are rather pleased this has happened and were even expecting it to happen.

DB: This is coming out of the European Union today: "The European Union strongly condemns the attack that took place against Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, England on March 4 that also left a police officer seriously ill.

The lives of many citizens were threatened by this reckless and illegal action. The European Union takes extremely seriously the UK government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible."

CM: This phrase "highly likely" admits that they don't have the evidence to back this up. It's a speculation.

DB: They say that the poison is consistent with what the Russians have used in the past.

CM: The claim is that this is one of a group of nerve agents known as a Novichok. The Novichok program was being run in the 1980's by the Soviets. The idea was to develop chemical weapons which could be quickly put together from commercial pesticides and fertilizers. They came up with a number of theoretical designs for such weapons.

Until now, the official position of the British government and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was that there was doubt as to whether they actually produced any of these. As of now, they haven't been put on the banned list, precisely because the scientific community has doubted their existence. So the British government's ability on day-one to identify this was quite remarkable.

Novichok is not a particular weapon but a class of weapon. Russia is by no means the only country capable of producing this kind of weapon. In 2016, the Iranians succeeded in producing several Novichok weapons and they reported their results to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Their motivation was that they were concerned that they themselves might be attacked by chemical weapons, possibly from Israel. There are at least a couple dozen countries who have the technical capability to create this type of nerve agent.

In order to take blood samples from the Skripals, who were both in a coma, doctors had to get court approval. And in giving evidence to the High Court, two scientists stated that the Skripals had been poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent or a "closely related agent." It looks to many people like this may just be a silly amateur mixture of different insecticides.

Other questions arise. The British government has been telling us that this is ten times more powerful than a standard nerve agent. Thankfully, so far, nobody has been killed. Why isn't this deadly agent more effective? Why is it that the doctor who administered first aid to Yulia Skripal was completely unaffected, even though he had extensive physical contact with her?

DB: But some people will say that the only country that would want to silence a former Russian spy would be Russia.

CM: Our foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, has gone on record as saying that the Russians have been secretly stockpiling this chemical weapon for a decade and have had a secret program of assassination techniques. But if you were Vladimir Putin and you had this secret nerve agent, why would you blow your cover by using it on this retired spy who you released from prison years ago? The whole scenario is utterly implausible.

Why would Russia wish to ruin its international reputation with this entirely gratuitous violence against an old spy? Skripal was exchanged as part of a spy swap. If people are going to swap spies and then kill them, there won't be any spy swaps in the future. A KGB person like Putin is the last person who is going to destroy the system of spy swaps.

Randy Credico: Mr. Murray, there has been a concerted effort to defame you and undermine your credibility. What effect has this had on you and your family?

CM: It has been really quite unpleasant. The mainstream media has permitted no doubt at all. All of them are just printing government propaganda. I went on social media to post my doubts about this story being too convenient and too easy. My first piece on this, "Russian to Judgment," had millions of viewers. That brought upon me the wrath of the establishment. I became the recipient of hundreds of pieces of Twitter abuse in which I was called a nut and a conspiracy theorist.

RC: Who stands to benefit from this attack?

CM: It adds fuel to the new Cold War. The armaments industry are the primary people who benefit. This kind of thing is very good for defense budgets. It is very good news for the spies and security services. Here in the UK the industry employs over 100,000 people. In a country of 60 million, this is a strong and very highly paid interest group. All of these people are seeing a major ramping up of their budgets. When the people feeding-in the intelligence are the same people who are benefiting financially from that story, then you have to worry. And particularly for right-wing politicians this is a cheap way of getting support.

DB: Mr. Murray, I don't think that we can separate this from the so-called "Russiagate frenzy." Can you state unequivocally that there were substantial leaks from the DNC, as opposed to hacks?

CM: I can promise you that what came out of the DNC were leaks. They were from somebody who legally had access to the information. It was not an outside hack, not by the Russians, not by anyone.

DB: What if you were subpoenaed before Congress, would you take the fifth or

would you tell that story?

CM: I've actually been in touch with them, saying I know what happened here and could perhaps save them a lot of time. But they haven't replied and I don't expect them to. If called, I would turn up and I would gladly tell them what I have told you: That I know for sure that this wasn't a Russian hack but a leak. I would not give any further details because that might compromise others.

The other thing about the Skripal case, of course, is the connection to Orbis Intelligence and Christopher Steele and Pablo Miller. The person who wrote the dossier on Donald Trump for the Clinton campaign was Christopher Steele of Orbis Intelligence. He was in MI6 in the Russian Embassy in Moscow at the time when Skripal was a key double agent. The guy who was responsible for handling Skripal on a day-to-day basis was Pablo Miller. Pablo Miller also worked for Orbis Intelligence. The MI6 has never had the close-up access to Putin that that dossier claims to have. Plainly, a great deal of it is fabrication.

I strongly suspect that Mr. Skripal was involved in the production of that dossier about Donald Trump. I admit that this is circumstantial, but that dossier was produced while Pablo Miller was working for Orbis Intelligence.

Like Mr. Steele, Pablo Miller was a former MI6 agent in Russia. And Pablo Miller was also living in Salisbury, within a short distance of Skripal. If you are going to produce a dossier which invents a lot of stuff about Donald Trump and his connections to the circle around Putin, you need a Russian source who can give you names and lend the dossier a degree of authenticity. I believe that that kind of detail is what Skripal provided to the Steele dossier.

This would seem a much more plausible lead in investigating this case. The idea that you kill someone for something that happened twelve years ago is frankly much less compelling than something that is happening now. Of course, there is a possibility that Skripal revealed something in the dossier which the Russians didn't want revealed, that they decided he was still a danger and should be eliminated.

The other possibility is that Mr. Skripal was a double agent who worked for money. He sold to the British names of Russian officers and agents serving abroad. So he is not the most principled of people. And once you've become a double agent, it's not hard to become a triple agent. And if Skripal knows that this dossier is full of lies, he might come out and confess to fabricating all of this in hopes of making financial gain.

DB: You feel that you are under attack for taking this position?

CM: Yes, and it is not just the nasty tweets and emails. My website has been

under attack, at a rate of millions of hits per minute.

RC: Have any of the mainstream media in Britain reported anything other than the government line?

CM: Strangely enough, after I posted it, the BBC reported the fact that Skripal's handler in Russia was now working for Steele and that Skripal and Pablo Miller lived in the same town. But the BBC contacted Orbis and they said that wasn't true. That was the end of that.

RC: You have been attacked by foreign minister Boris Johnson.

CM: Interestingly, when talking to journalists, Boris Johnson and others have stated clearly that this poison must have come from Russia, but in their formal statements to Parliament and the United Nations Security Council, they write that it was "a weapon of a type developed by Russia." That is very different from saying that it is a Russian weapon.

RC: Are you concerned that this might be leading to nuclear war?

CM: I think that the Russians have the sense not to overreact. All they have done so far is to match what is done rather than up the ante. So when we expelled 23 diplomats, the Russians expelled 23 diplomats. And it looks like this sort of tit for tat will result from the other expulsions.

But I strongly believe that this is happening because there are a lot of people—in the military, in the weapons industry—who miss the Cold War. They are seeing a threat to their budgets. We are entering a period where there is not going to be a lot of international cooperation and we are going to see a lot of militaristic posturing. Of course, there is always the prospect that something can go wrong.

DB: What do you think of John Bolton being appointed National Security Advisor? This is someone who has said that he would be happy if North Korea disappeared. He doesn't seem to be someone who would support the ongoing arrangement with Iran.

CM: I think it is very scary. Bolton obviously is the hawk of hawks and he bore a huge responsibility for the Iraq War. It is a very strange and irresponsible appointment. A couple days ago, I was reviewing Trump's term in office and I realized that one good thing is that he hasn't initiated a war till now. I'm not convinced Hillary wouldn't have gotten us into an armed conflict by this point. But then, now Trump appoints John Bolton, which leads me to suspect that war might not be far off.

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The Rush to a New Cold War

From the Archive: The U.S. and Russia are expelling dozens of each other’s diplomats, bringing bilateral relations to a new low. In this 2015 interview with Dennis Bernstein, the late Robert Parry explained the origins of the New Cold War.

By Dennis J. Bernstein (first published June 29, 2015)

A new Cold War has taken shape between nuclear-armed Russia and the United States with very little public debate, just a return to hostile rhetoric and military moves and counter-moves over Ukraine, an issue that journalist Robert Parry has followed over the past year and a half.

Parry, a longtime Washington-based investigative reporter and editor of Consortiumnews.com, was interviewed about the crisis by Dennis J. Bernstein for Pacifica Radio’s Flashpoint program.

DB: It looks like the U.S., with Barack Obama leading the charge, has entered what you call “the second cold war.” What do you mean by the second cold war?

RP: There has been a sharp increase in tension, obviously, between the United States and Russia. We’ve seen a very divergent way of looking at the problem. The United States and mainstream media have taken a very propagandist view of what occurred in Ukraine. The Russians have taken a very different view, which, perhaps to our amazement, is more accurate than what the United States is saying.

Because of these two divergent narratives, the countries have essentially plunged back into a cold war, where there’s a lot of hostility, threats of military escalations, with the U.S. sending military teams to essentially parade along the western border of Russia. Some of those countries are NATO allies, and others, like Ukraine, may want to become a NATO ally.

So these tensions are building up, that oddly don’t have much direct connection to U.S. national interests, but have become a kind of *cause celebre* in Official Washington where everyone just wants to stand tough against the Russians and bash Putin. It’s become almost a self-perpetuating dynamic.

The Russians have taken a very different perspective, which is that the United States is encroaching on its borders and threatening them in a strategic manner. They also look at what happened in Ukraine very differently. They see a U.S.-backed *coup d'état* in February 2014 that ousted an elected president and put in a regime that is very supportive of free market, neoliberal policies, but also includes very strong right-wing elements, including neo-Nazis and far-right nationalists. A crisis was created and tensions continue to spiral out of control.

DB: Let's talk about the origins of this cold war rhetoric. First, we have Barack Obama leading the charge. He has become a real cold warrior, hasn't he?

RP: He's certainly allowed some of his underlings to use very aggressive rhetoric against the Russians, particularly Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, who led the charge in supporting the *coup* in Ukraine in early 2014.

DB: When you say *coup*, most people don't know that occurred. Was there a *coup*?

RP: Of course there was. There was an armed uprising that involved some very far right neo-Nazi militias that had been organizing and penetrating into what became the Maidan protests against the decision by the elected President Yanukovich not to go ahead quickly with an association with the European Union. That became increasingly violent; including some mysterious sniper attacks killing police and demonstrators, and getting the two sides to go at each other.

There was a political effort on Feb. 21, 2014, where Yanukovich agreed to reduce his powers and have early elections so he could be elected out of office. It was signed by three European countries to guarantee it. The next day there was a *coup*. These right-wing groups surged forward, seizing buildings, and Yanukovich barely escaped with his life.

Very quickly, despite the very unconstitutional nature of this change of power, the United States and European Union recognized this as legitimate. But it was obviously something the ethnic Russians, especially those in the eastern and southern Ukraine, found objectionable. They were the bases of support for Yanukovich, so they began to rise up, and this *coup d'état* then merged into a civil war.

DB: You have previously said the U.S. played an active role in this *coup*.

RP: There's no question. The U.S. was supporting, through the National Endowment for Democracy, scores of political organizations that were working to overthrow the elected government. There were other U.S. entities, like USAID, as well as

members of the U.S. government. Sen. John McCain went to Kiev, spoke to this very right-wing group, and said the U.S. supports you and what you are doing.

Then there was the famous phone conversation that was intercepted between Assistant Secretary of State Nuland and Ambassador Jeffrey Pyatt where they discussed who was going to take over after the change of power. Nuland put forward that Yatsenyuk "is the guy," who after the *coup* became the prime minister. There were all the markings of a *coup d'état*. More neutral observers, who have looked at this, including the head of the Stratfor think tank (George Friedman), have called it the most obvious *coup* he's ever seen.

That was the reality, but the U.S. news media and U.S. government chose to present it in a very different way. The Yanukovych government just left the scene, or something, is how the New York Times presented it. That wasn't real, but that's how they sold it to the American people.

We have two very distinct ways of looking at this. One is the ethnic Russians of Ukraine who saw their president violently overthrown, and the other is the western Ukrainians, backed by the U.S., and in some degree the European Union, saying they got rid of a corrupt leader, through a revolution, if you will. That became the core problem between the U.S. and Russians. Instead of finding common factual points to agree on, there are these two distinctly different narratives about what went on there.

DB: In Germany, recently, Obama himself carried this forward.

RP: Obama has been all over the map on this. In May, he sent Secretary of State Kerry to meet with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov in Sochi, Russia. Those meetings, by all accounts, went very well in that Kerry was looking for Russian help on a variety of international problems, including Syria, Libya, the Iranian nuclear talks, and so forth. These are areas where Putin has been very helpful in the past in terms of U.S. policy. There was a general meeting of the minds, it seemed.

But after Kerry returned, Obama seemed to swing back, to go more with his hardliners. That was followed by the recent G7 Summit in Bavaria, at which Obama pushed for a continuation of economic sanctions against Russia. He continued to blame Russia for all the problems of Ukraine. He pretended that the Russians were the problem for why the Minsk 2 Peace Accord had not been going forward, even though the accord was essentially Putin's idea that he sold to the Germans and the French. It's really the Kiev regime that has tried to derail the Minsk 2 agreement from the very time it was signed.

Yet Obama took aggressive positions in Bavaria, including personal insults

directed at Putin. Now we are back into this idea that we must have a confrontation with Russia. We're seeing this play out not just at the government level, but now also at the media level. At the more popular level, the *New York Times* and other major news organizations essentially are acting as propaganda agents for the U.S. government, by simply conveying whatever the government says as fact, and not something to be checked out.

DB: You are saying this as somebody who is based outside the Beltway, correct?

RP: No, I'm actually inside the Beltway.

DB: Good, I feel better now that you're in there. Where could this kind of policy lead? You've expressed concerns that we are dealing with two major nuclear powers. We have a man in Russia who will not be fooled with public relations, given that he was a master of it as head of the KGB. So where is this going?

RP: It has very dangerous possibilities. One hopes, of course, that cooler heads will prevail. But we see that when people paint themselves into corners, they sometimes don't want to get into the embarrassment of getting themselves out. The more rhetoric and propaganda you throw into this, the harder it is for people to come to some common ground, reach an agreement and work things out.

There's been this idea among the neoconservatives in Washington, for some time now, that the real goal here is to oust Putin. As Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy, said back in 2013, Ukraine is "the biggest prize." But he made clear that it was simply a stepping-stone to removing Putin as the President of Russia, doing some sort of regime change in Moscow.

What the neocons often fail to understand, as we've seen very painfully in places like Iraq, is they think things are going to be easy, they can simply put in somebody like Chalabi in Baghdad and everything will work out fine. But that often isn't the way it goes. In the case of Russia, the great danger is that if the U.S. could destabilize Russia, somehow create a political crisis there, it's very possible that instead of an easily manipulated person like Yeltsin, there would be a super hard-line nationalist taking over, taking a harder line than Putin. Then you can get into a situation where a nuclear confrontation would become a very real possibility.

To deal with that kind of dangerous reality and be reasonable, the U.S. needs to realize that the ethnic Russians in Ukraine have a legitimate beef, and they are not simply part of a Russian invasion or aggression. Both sides have some argument here. All the truth does not rest in Washington DC and I would argue that less of it rests in Washington DC. If you don't deal with people honestly

and straightforwardly, and try to understand their concern, a manageable crisis can turn into one that spins out of control.

DB: I have always thought that to some degree that the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, on foreign policy issues, particularly East and West, have often acted as a wing, an arm, a public relations division of the State Department. Is that getting worse?

RP: Yes, it's been a problem. In 2002 and 2003, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* essentially led the drive for believing that Saddam Hussein had WMDs and the only answer was to invade Iraq. We've seen what that led to. The great irony here is that as much as the Washington press corps pretends it stands for truth and all these good things, there was virtually no accountability assessed upon people who misreported that story.

It's true that there's safety in numbers. All the important journalists got the story wrong and almost none of them were punished. They were allowed to go on, many in the same positions that they held then. Michael Gordon is still the Pentagon correspondent for the *New York Times*. He was one of the co-authors of the famous aluminum tube story, that these tubes being used for nuclear centrifuges, when they weren't fit for that at all. Fred Hiatt, the editorial page editor of the *Washington Post*, said as flat fact that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction back in 2002 and 2003. He's still in the same job.

There's a problem of no accountability, so many of these news organizations go from one catastrophic inability to report honestly about what is going on in the world, to the next. Now they've upped the ante to a possible confrontation between nuclear-armed Russia and nuclear-armed United States. We are now back into the cold war mentality. The *New York Times* had a piece this week essentially suggesting that anybody who doesn't go along with the U.S. version of events must be working for Moscow.

We are starting to see McCarthyism rear its ugly head as well. Once you get into these kinds of propaganda wars, anyone who challenges or questions them has their patriotism questioned. We saw that somewhat in Iraq when people who questioned the WMD story early were called Saddam apologists. Now we're seeing something similar happening. If you point out some of these inconvenient facts that don't make the Kiev regime look too good, you're accused of being a stooge of Moscow.

DB: I am concerned that this kind of policy is going to continue. And it's not Saddam Hussein now, but Vladimir Putin, who has extreme experience, about how to play public relations games. And he has a nuclear arsenal, so it's a whole different game here.

RP: The American propaganda barrage has not at all swayed the Russian people and government. Of course, the U.S. says they are all being propagandized by *Russia Today* and other Russian networks. Frankly, one can argue with some ways some things have been reported by *RT* or other Russian sources, but they have been doing a more accurate, on-the-ground job than the U.S. press corps has been.

You can point to a number of egregious major mistakes made by the major U.S. news organizations. The *New York Times* went along with a bogus photograph from spring 2014 supposedly showing Russian troops in Ukraine. It turned out that some of the photographs were misrepresented and did not show what they were supposed to show. They [the Times writers] were forced to retract that.

You can point to factual errors on both sides, but it's not something where the U.S., as the *New York Times* tries to present it, is perfect and hasn't presented anything improperly, while the Russian media are all lies and propaganda. It's not true. But it's getting to the point where you cannot be a reasonable person, or look at things objectively, because you are pushed into taking sides.

That's where journalism is a very dangerous thing – especially here. There was a lot of dangerous reporting during the cold war that in some cases pushed the two sides into dangerous confrontations. That can happen again. We were lucky to escape the '60s without a nuclear war. Now we are rushing ourselves back into something that William Polk, a writer and former diplomat of the Kennedy administration, has called a possible Cuban missile crisis in reverse.

This time we're the ones pushing our military forces onto the Russian border, rather than the Russians putting missiles onto a place like Cuba. We know how Americans reacted to that. Now the Russians are facing something very similar.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Same Old Media Parade: Why Are Liberals Cheering?

Not all foes of Trump are allies of progressives – especially the hawks, spooks and perjurers who parade across CNN and MSNBC every day, Jeff Cohen reminds us.

By Jeff Cohen

When the “War on Terror” was launched in 2001, mainstream media – especially cable TV news – started a parade. It was a narrow parade of hawkish retired military and intelligence brass promoting war as the response to the crime of 9/11, predicting success and identifying foreign enemies to attack.

We can look back at this parade and laugh at the total nonsense dispensed. But the more human response is to cry – over the toll, still mounting, of hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths from Afghanistan to Iraq and beyond, and violent instability across the region, including countries that were relatively stable and prosperous on Sept. 10, 2001. (Not to mention militarization and loss of civil liberties at home.)

I witnessed the parade of disinformation from inside cable news, where I worked as an on-air contributor at Fox News and MSNBC at the beginning of the War on Terror. In fact, this parade eventually knocked me off the air – and out of my job at MSNBC, three weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

It’s now been 15 years since the tragic invasion of Iraq. The huge mainstream media failure in the run-up to the invasion is taught in college journalism courses, including mine.

Who can forget CNN’s Chief News Executive boasting that, before the Iraq invasion, he’d sought prior approval and received “a big thumbs up” from the Pentagon on the ex-generals that CNN featured as allegedly independent analysts?

Who can forget David Barstow’s 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning expose for the *New York Times* – based on 8,000 pages of internal Pentagon emails and transcripts – showing that network TV’s hawkish retired generals were not only being paid by big military contractors, but were being spoon-fed talking points and spin by the Pentagon month after month as they paraded on TV?

Who can forget that NBC/MSNBC’s top military analyst, ex-Gen. Barry McCaffrey, relentlessly pushed for war based on falsehoods (“thousands of gallons of mustard agents, sarin, nerve agent VX still in Iraq”), offered continuously ridiculous punditry (like praising Defense Secretary Rumsfeld’s advance-planning of the Iraq occupation), and famously crowed on MSNBC, “Thank God for the Abrams tank and the Bradley fighting vehicle” – without mentioning his role at military contractor IDT that made millions for doing God’s work on the Abrams and Bradley?

Who can forget all these things?

MSNBC, apparently.

I turned on the “progressive” news channel a few nights ago to see Chris Hayes

politely interviewing Gen. McCaffrey. Did Hayes – during the week marking the 15th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq – press McCaffrey on his role in that disaster? Perhaps demand an explanation or an apology? No. The topic was Trump’s weird attraction to Putin. That’s a worthy topic. But Barry McCaffrey as expert and arbiter! Still?

Just as they did in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion, MSNBC and CNN now serve up a steady parade of war hawks, spies and liars, presenting them as credible and almost heroic as long as they criticize the despicable man in the White House.

I’d turned to MSNBC that night after disgustedly turning off Anderson Cooper softly interviewing a CNN contributor who seems to appear every hour: ex-National Intelligence Director James Clapper. You remember Clapper? Five years ago this month, Clapper infamously perjured himself before the U.S. Senate by denying NSA bulk surveillance. His perjury is not a topic that CNN asks Clapper about – while he discusses the lack of ethics and honesty in Team Trump.

When it comes to Trump critics, CNN and MSNBC regularly serve up a basket of elite deplorables from the military/intelligence establishment – for example, the appalling ex-CIA Director John Brennan and horrific former acting CIA Director John McLaughlin. The hollowness of their Trump critique on “liberal cable news” was on display last week when both men endorsed Trump’s choice for CIA chief, torture-overseer Gina Haspel.

I’m worried about anti-Trump activists, even some quite progressive, who’ve come to see corporate news channels like CNN and MSNBC as their saviors. It’s a dangerous illusion.

A few points to consider:

Not all foes of Trump are allies of progressives – especially the hawks, spooks and perjurers who parade across CNN and MSNBC every day.

Progressives should be wary of the growing alliance between Clintonite/MSNBC-style liberals and neo-con militarists forever in search of the next enemy – an alliance that began before the Trump campaign and will likely continue after Trump is deposed (hopefully soon).

Trump is doing enormous damage to our country and the world – but you won’t see most of it on MSNBC or any mainstream outlet that covers the Trump White House as a TV soap opera.

When you hear nightly on CNN and MSNBC about Putin’s “attack on our democracy,” let’s not forget that – whatever impact Russia had on the 2016 election (evidence so far suggests it was small) – “our democracy” has been under attack

for decades by internal enemies: big money control of both major parties, corporate media dominance, Democratic subservience to Wall Street, Republican suppression of voters of color and youth, an archaic election system protected by both parties, etc.

I would like to see even 10 percent of MSNBC's "Russiagate" coverage diverted to any of the above issues, but I'm not holding my breath. Nor am I waiting for the Comcast-owned channel to offer thorough coverage of Trump's biggest threat to the First Amendment: ending Net Neutrality.

Progressives can easily agree that it's a top priority to end Republican control of Congress and depose Trump.

Yet the fight for justice and democracy will also require battles against powerful and oppressive institutions that may now seem to be anti-Trump: certain media conglomerates and the military-industrial-surveillance complex.

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In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in February focused on the release of the so-called "Nunes Memo", the US system of perpetual warfare, and the growing risk of confrontations in Syria, North Korea and Iran.

["Outpouring of Support Honors Robert Parry"](#) Feb. 1, 2018

["U.S. Media's Objectivity Questioned Abroad"](#) by Andrew Spannaus, Feb. 2, 2018

["Nunes Memo Reports Crimes at Top of FBI and DOJ"](#) by Ray McGovern, Feb. 2, 2018

["'Duck and Cover' Drills Exacerbate Fears of N. Korea War"](#) by Ann Wright, Feb. 3, 2018

["Do We Really Want Nuclear War with Russia?"](#) by Robert Parry, Feb. 4, 2018

["Recipe Concocted for Perpetual War is a Bitter One"](#) by Robert Wing and Coleen Rowley, Feb. 4, 2018

["WMD Claims in Syria Raise Concerns over U.S. Escalation"](#) by Rick Sterling, Feb.

4, 2018

“Connecticut Court Decision Highlights U.S. Educational Failures” by Dennis J. Bernstein, Feb. 5, 2018

“Understanding Russia, Un-Demonizing Putin” by Sharon Tennison, Feb. 6, 2018

“Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?” by Robert Parry, Feb. 6, 2018

“No Time for Complacency over Korea War Threat” by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 7, 2018

“‘This is Nuts’: Liberals Launch ‘Largest Mobilization in History’ in Defense of Russiagate Probe” by Coleen Rowley and Nat Parry, Feb. 9, 2018

“A Note to Our Readers” by Nat Parry, Feb. 10, 2018

“Donald Trump v. the Spooks” by Annie Machon, Feb.23, 2018

“How Establishment Propaganda Gaslights Us Into Submission” by Caitlin Johnstone, Feb. 12, 2018

“Budget Woes Sign of a Dysfunctional Empire” by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 13, 2018

“The Right’s Second Amendment Lies” by Robert Parry, Feb. 16, 2018

“NYT’s ‘Really Weird’ Russiagate Story” by Daniel Lazare, Feb. 16, 2018

“Russians Spooked by Nukes-Against-Cyber-Attack Policy” by Ray McGovern and William Binney, Feb. 16, 2018

“Nunes: FBI and DOJ Perps Could Be Put on Trial” by Ray McGovern, Feb. 19, 2018

“U.S. Empire Still Incoherent After All These Years” by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Feb. 20, 2018

“Time to Admit the Afghan War is ‘Nonsense’” by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 22, 2018

“Selective Outrage Undermines Human Rights in Syria” by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 23, 2018

“The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died” by Daniel Lazare, Feb. 24, 2018

“Growing Risk of U.S.-Iran Hostilities Based on False Pretexts, Intel Vets Warn” by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, Feb. 26, 2018

“Who Benefits from Russia’s ‘Peculiar’ Doping Violations?” by Rick Sterling,

Feb. 26, 2018

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Senate Votes to Continue Yemen Devastation

On Tuesday, the Senate voted down a resolution that would have withdrawn US support for the Saudi-led war on Yemen, choosing instead to continue to illegally assist what the UN has called “the world’s largest humanitarian crisis,” reports Dennis J. Bernstein and Shireen Al-Adeimi in this interview.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Shireen Al-Adeimi is a doctoral candidate at Harvard University. But she is having a hard time focusing on her studies, when friends and family back home in Yemen are under violent attack by the heavily armed, US-backed Saudi forces, with many going hungry as a result of the Saudi blockade.

Al-Adeimi said on Tuesday, March 20, “This month marks the third anniversary of the U.S.-backed, Saudi-led war on Yemen. Despite the dire humanitarian crisis, however, the United States continues to sell arms to the Saudis and provide them with military support.”

Senators Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Mike Lee (R-Ut.), and Chris Murphy (D-Ct.) had introduced a bill that aimed to force a withdrawal of the United States from the Saudi-led war, based on violations of the War Powers Act. But the Bill, [Senate Joint Resolution 54](#), cosponsored by 10 senators, was voted down 55-44 on Tuesday.

Of course it was no surprise, given the amount of lobbying money spent by the Saudis to buy congressional silence and support. The bill also was met with fierce opposition by various Trump administration officials.

The American Conservative Magazine reported that “the media has been laying out the red carpet for Crown Prince bin Salman in Washington. What the establishment press won’t tell you is that no less than 25 American lobbying firms worked for the Saudi Arabian government in 2017 to the tune of \$16 million, to burnish their image, manage the message, and get massive military contracts for the weapons of war that are now being used to kill, maim and slowly starve millions of civilians in Yemen today.”

I spoke with Shireen Al-Adeimi on Tuesday, March 20, directly following the vote by Congress to continue aid for the US-supported, Saudi-led slaughter.

Dennis Bernstein: Shireen, what is your response to the Senate voting to continue aid to the Saudis?

Shireen Al-Adeimi: It is very disappointing because it ensures that millions more Yemenis will continue to suffer. On average, 130 children die every day in Yemen due to malnutrition and disease caused by the Saudi-led blockade. Many more will die because of US bombs which are dropped from Saudi jets. People continue to die for no reason at all.

DB: Could you give us a little background?

SAA: The Saudis began bombing Yemen in March, 2015. Right now, some 80% of a population of 24 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

Yemen is experiencing the world’s worst cholera outbreak in modern history, with over 1 million cases. There is a severe water crisis affecting 15 million people in Yemen.

Hundreds of thousands have died of malnutrition and disease because Saudi Arabia is not only bombing Yemen but is also blockading Yemen by land, sea and air, ensuring that no aid or medicine can come into the country. The Saudis have created what the UN calls “the worst humanitarian crisis on earth today.”

DB: Could you describe the United States’ role in all of this?

SAA: In January, the US Army published an article detailing their support for the Saudis, including training Saudi soldiers, advising military personnel, maintaining and upgrading vehicles and aircraft, providing courses on communication and navigation, and providing Saudi jets with mid-air refueling.

This is in addition to the billions in weapon sales between the US and Saudi Arabia every year.

The bottom line is that the United States is benefiting from this relationship with the Saudis and it doesn’t seem to matter that this has caused such a humanitarian toll in the process. Estimates are that over 75% of the targets in

Yemen have been civilian targets.

DB: Is there a notable difference between the policies of the last administration and those of the Trump administration?

SAA: Absolutely not. This began under the Obama administration, which sold billions in weapons to the Saudis and provided them with the logistical services I just mentioned. The Trump policy in Yemen is basically on autopilot, following blindly what the Obama administration did. This is very much a bipartisan effort.

DB: Tell us more about how this is evolving on the ground.

SAA: People have lost their jobs. There is no future to look forward to. People who were once wealthy or middle-class are now resorting to begging on the streets and selling their possessions. Three million are displaced internally because there is nowhere to go with the blockade in place. People can't find water, they can't find food, they can't find medicine or fuel. They can't decide whether to take a sick child to the hospital or provide them with food. It is as bad as it can get.

DB: The Saudi prince was just in D.C. He said that he really feels for the people of Yemen and that he is working on easing the blockade because he understands how devastating it has been. What is your response to that?

SAA: It is a complete fabrication. They are the ones imposing the blockade, they are the ones bombing a sovereign country. They have no business in Yemen at all. And then to claim that it is the Houthis who are preventing food and medicine from coming into the country is completely absurd. In fact, the Saudis have acknowledged that they are using starvation as a weapon.

They have already bombed most hospitals in Yemen. Four times they bombed Doctors without Borders hospitals. So far they have caused the death of at least 10,000 civilians through airstrikes and tens of thousands more through disease and malnutrition caused by the blockade.

DB: The US media has once again dropped the ball.

SAA: MSNBC reported on Yemen once in 2017 and not once since then. There is no reporting on the humanitarian crisis, on the resolutions before Congress. When it comes to the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia, people just don't want to go there.

DB: What are human rights organizations saying about the potential for famine?

SAA: The UN has designated Yemen a level 3 for famine out of a range of 1 to 4,

but when you have people already dying of starvation it doesn't matter much what level they establish. In 2015, 15,000 children died of hunger and disease in Yemen and a similar number in 2016. We are not at the brink of famine, we are already there. People are dying of starvation every day.

DB: Is it possible to get through to folks on the ground there? Is there outreach from the country for support?

SAA: Organizations such as Oxfam and Save the Children do have their ships there and they do bring in aid and food to the 7 million people who depend on it every day. But even that flow is obstructed by the Saudis. The cost of fuel has increased 200%. Family members like myself are sending cash, as are organizations like Doctors without Borders, to keep people employed and afloat. Kids are dying of diseases that are completely preventable. No one has to die from cholera.

DB: How do you explain these congress people who support this ongoing war and famine in Yemen? Are they owned by the weapons manufacturers?

SAA: Some claim that it protects Saudi interests and prevents Iran from spreading its tentacles in the region. But they undoubtedly have contact to the Saudis and to the weapons manufacturers who want to maintain their interests in Saudi Arabia.

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Capitalism's Process of Universal Commodification

The Marvel/Disney movie "Black Panther" is the latest example of an idea with anti-capitalist origins being co-opted for corporate commodification and profit, explains Lawrence Davidson in this analysis.

By Lawrence Davidson

Paradoxical Profit

Unless regulated, capitalism operates as a wide-open market system. If a demand exists or can be created and a profit made, that demand will be met. As a

consequence, capitalism has the capacity to commercialize almost anything, including its detractors and even its enemies.

Here are some examples:

– Che Guevara, the iconic Marxist revolutionary. He was young and handsome when he served at the side of Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution in the 1950s. Today, most people outside of Cuba know of him only as an image on T-shirts, backpacks and posters. He has been immortalized at a profit by the economic system he despised.

– Wall-E, a 2008 animated movie about an “adorable robot” left behind on earth after mankind abandons the planet. It seems that humans have reduced their home to a garbage heap and Wall-E (short for “Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class”) has the job of cleaning the place up. Ironically, the movie suggests to us the dangers of commercialism while still managing to gross \$533.3 million worldwide. Half of that came from audiences in the U.S., the homeland of “shop till you drop.”

– Apple’s “Think Different” sales campaign. This promotion of Apple products opens with the line, “Here is to the crazy ones.” This is followed by images of Einstein, Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King, among others – folks who, the commercial tells us, are “rebels and misfits and have no respect for the status quo.” Apple was promoting its groundbreaking computer products using the images of some people who really didn’t believe in a capitalist system. Nonetheless, this promotion campaign became iconic and probably can be said to have helped the company “change the world” – just not in the direction some of those “crazy ones” would have liked.

– Graffiti Art. There is a 2016 documentary film, Wall Writers: Graffiti In Its Innocence, that depicts the early days of graffiti art (1960s and 1970s) as a sometimes illegal wall writing phenomenon. It explains that the original “wall writers” were anonymous people seeking recognition basically among their own kind. There was no thought that this activity was giving rise to an art form and certainly not to the possibility that it could be a vehicle to riches. But the graffiti phenomenon exploded across the United States and soon spread to England. By 1973 it was sufficiently in the public mind to be used as a successful movie title, “American Graffiti.” Soon after that (by the 1980s), some of the best graffiti had recognized artistic value and was integrated into the art market. Currently some of it is sold for millions of dollars.

– The Weather Underground is an on-line site that “provides local & long range weather forecasts, weather reports, maps & tropical weather conditions for locations worldwide.” But where does that name come from? It is taken from a

radical anti-capitalist youth group known as the "Weathermen." This group broke off from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), also a radical group, in 1970. After doing so the radical Weathermen declared war on the U.S. government.

It seems that both the meteorological Weathermen and the radical political Weathermen began at the University of Michigan. That is where the meteorologists first got their start in 1995, working with the university's internet weather database. That is also where in 1970, the SDS split apart and the radical Weathermen Underground was founded. By the way, the split came about democratically through a vote of assembled members. I know. I was there (on the non-Weathermen side). Maybe some of the future meteorologists were there as well, and that is how they chose the name.

The Weather Underground forecasting organization is now owned by The Weather Company, which in turn is owned by IBM.

Black Panther – The Movie and the Party

Market capitalism will also seek to profit from aspects of culture – even those parts that are marginalized, for instance, African American culture and the concept of Black pride.

In 1971 we got the Shaft movies of the cool Black private eye who plays tough on the streets of New York City. This gave rise to a myriad other "blaxploitation" films. The Shaft productions mimicked White equivalents using Black actors and Black backdrops. They demonstrated that African Americans are part of a dominant culture which cannot be uniquely Black. In truth, it is a White culture that has been modified over time by its minority components: Black, Asian, Latin, Native American, etc. into a hybrid that is uniquely American.

I don't want to be misunderstood here. African Americans can take great pride in their movies and other arts. Black actors, screenwriters, directors and producers are as competent as their White counterparts. However, they and their Black audience are still captive to that preexisting hybrid cultural canvas on which they, and other minorities, are led to play out their creativity.

This brings us to the latest, and perhaps most spectacular example of this dilemma, the Disney company's movie Black Panther. I have two comments on this worldwide commercial success (the movie has grossed over a billion dollars).

– As with some of the examples given in the first part of this analysis, the movie exploits for profit an organization that was anti-capitalist. The giveaway is the title itself. The "Black Panther" is closely linked in cultural memory to an organization known as the Black Panther Party. This was a radical organization created in the 1960s to provide for the needs of poor Black

neighborhoods (the group originated the idea of the school breakfast program) and to protect residents both from criminals and the police, who were viewed as racist occupiers. The Black Panther Party became the target of violent attacks by agents of the U.S. government and eventually destroyed.

– Having been rendered safe through its destruction, the Black Panther Party's image could be reworked and then reintroduced back into the prevailing culture. The Disney movie does just this. This is not to say that the film does not have merit. Its depiction of strong Black women, Black scientists and technicians, and the able and successful Black civilization of Wakanda are inspiring. On the other hand, the savagery that is part of Wakanda's succession process is problematic.

Overall, the movie is formulaic. It is a familiar good vs. bad scenario. There is a not entirely unsympathetic arch-villain, minor bad guys who come around to be good guys, and competitive tension in the good-guy camp. We have gangsters, government agents and almost non-stop violence. Nothing particularly original here. Nor is there anything original, and certainly nothing radical, about the film's answer to the problems of poor African Americans – an outreach center in a needy urban neighborhood. By the way, this “cinematically portrayed help effort” works primarily because of the fantasy that there is a Black superpower backing it up. When real Black Panthers tried the same sort of outreach in the 1960s, they were arrested and sometimes murdered.

It is worrisome that the enthusiasm for the movie is based on a fantasy that essentially makes the tragedy of the real-life Black Panthers disappear. As the culture war now being fought in the U.S. between often racist ultra-conservatives and besieged progressives shows, we need change in the real world. Fantasy can give you a momentary lift and sense of pride, but in the end the real world's problems are still there.

In 1983, the Irish novelist Iris Murdoch remarked that “we live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.” Che Guevara, many graffiti artists, some of the “crazy ones” depicted in Apple's “Think Different” campaign, the original radicals of the Weather Underground, and the members of the Black Panther Party, all knew what reality was. They wanted to change it without recourse to fantasy. And, each time their attempts were stymied by a system that judged human needs solely in terms of monetary profit. This is brilliantly demonstrated by the fact that the images of these enemies of the system have been re-presented to us as within the context of profitable fantasy. The process has been remarkably successful and remarkably lucrative. It is also depressing and, in terms of social progress, represents a road to nowhere.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest; America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood; and Islamic Fundamentalism. He blogs at www.tothepointanalyses.com.

Iraq +15: Accumulated Evil of the Whole

Brushing aside warnings that he was about to unleash Armageddon in the Middle East, George W. Bush launched an unprovoked attack on Iraq on March 19-20, 2003, the ramifications of which we are still grappling with today, Nat Parry writes.

By Nat Parry

Robert Jackson, the Chief United States Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals, once denounced aggressive war as “the greatest menace of our time.” With much of Europe laying in smoldering ruin, he said in 1945 that “to initiate a war of aggression ... is not only an international crime: it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of whole.”

When it comes to the U.S. invasion of Iraq 15 years ago today, the accumulated evil of the whole is difficult to fully comprehend. Estimates of the war's costs vary, but commonly cited figures put the financial cost for U.S. taxpayers at upwards of a trillion dollars, the cost in Iraqi lives in the hundreds of thousands, and U.S. soldier deaths at nearly 5,000. Another 100,000 Americans have been wounded and four million Iraqis driven from their homes as refugees.

As staggering as those numbers may be, they don't come close to describing the true cost of the war, or the magnitude of the crime that was committed by launching it on March 19-20, 2003. Besides the cost in blood and treasure, the cost to basic principles of international justice, long-term geopolitical stability, and the impacts on the U.S. political system are equally profound.

Lessons Learned and Forgotten

Although for a time, it seemed that the lessons of the war were widely understood and had tangible effects on American politics – with Democrats, for example, taking control of Congress in the midterm elections of 2006 based primarily on growing antiwar sentiment around the country and Barack Obama defeating Hillary Clinton in the 2008 primaries based largely on the two

candidates' opposing views on the Iraq War – the political establishment has, since then, effectively swept these lessons under the rug.

One of those lessons, of course, was that proclamations of the intelligence community should be treated with huge grain of salt. In the build-up to war with Iraq a decade and a half ago, there were those who pushed back on the politicized and “cherry-picked” intelligence that the Bush administration was using to convince the American people of the need to go to war, but for the most part, the media and political establishment parroted these claims without showing the due diligence of independently confirming the claims or even applying basic principles of logic.

For example, even as United Nations weapons inspectors, led by Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, were coming up empty-handed when acting on tips from the U.S. intelligence community, few within the mainstream media were willing to draw the logical conclusion that the intelligence was wrong (or that the Bush administration was lying). Instead, they assumed that the UN inspectors were simply incompetent or that Saddam Hussein was just really good at hiding his weapons of mass destruction.

Yet, despite being misled so thoroughly back in 2002 and 2003, today Americans show the same credulousness to the intelligence community when it claims that “Russia hacked the 2016 election,” without offering proof. Liberals, in particular, have hitched their wagons to the investigation being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is widely hailed as a paragon of virtue, while the truth is, as FBI Director during the Bush administration, he was a key enabler of the WMD narrative used to launch an illegal war.

Mueller testified to Congress that “Iraq has moved to the top of my list” of threats to the domestic security of the United States. “As we previously briefed this Committee,” Mueller said on February 11, 2003, “Iraq’s WMD program poses a clear threat to our national security.” He warned that Baghdad might provide WMDs to al-Qaeda to carry out a catastrophic attack in the United States.

Mueller drew criticism at the time, including from FBI whistleblower Coleen Rowley, for conflating Iraq and al-Qaeda, with demands that the FBI produce whatever evidence it had on this supposed connection.

Today, of course, Mueller is celebrated by Democrats as the best hope for bringing down the presidency of Donald Trump. George W. Bush has also enjoyed a revival of his image thanks largely to his public criticisms of Trump, with a majority of Democrats now viewing the 43rd president favorably. Many Democrats have also embraced aggressive war – often couched in the rhetoric of “humanitarian interventionism” – as their preferred option to deal with foreign

policy challenges such as the Syrian conflict.

When the Democratic Party chose Clinton as its nominee in 2016, it appeared that Democrats had also embraced her willingness to use military force to achieve “regime change” in countries that are seen as a threat to U.S. interests – whether Iraq, Iran or Syria.

As a senator from New York during the build-up for military action against Iraq, Clinton not only voted to authorize the U.S. invasion, but fervently supported the war – which she backed with or without UN Security Council authorization. Her speech on the floor of the Senate on Oct. 10, 2002 arguing for military action promoted the same falsehoods that were being used by the Bush administration to build support for the war, claiming for example that Saddam Hussein had “given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members.”

“If left unchecked,” she said, “Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons. Should he succeed in that endeavor, he could alter the political and security landscape of the Middle East, which as we know all too well affects American security.”

Clinton maintained support for the war even as it became obvious that Iraq in fact had no weapons of mass destruction – the primary casus belli for the war – only cooling her enthusiasm in 2006 when it became clear that the Democratic base had turned decisively against the war and her hawkish position endangered her chances for the 2008 presidential nomination. But eight years later, the Democrats had apparently moved on, and her support for the war was no longer considered a disqualification for the presidency.

One of the lessons that should be recalled today, especially as the U.S. gears up today for possible confrontations with countries including North Korea and Russia, is how easy it was in 2002-2003 for the Bush administration to convince Americans that they were under threat from the regime of Saddam Hussein some 7,000 miles away. The claims about Iraq’s WMDs were untrue, with many saying so in real time – including by the newly formed group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which was regularly issuing memoranda to the president and to the American people debunking the falsehoods that were being promoted by the U.S. intelligence community.

But even if the claims about Iraq’s alleged stockpiles were true, there was still no reason to assume that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of launching a surprise attack against the United States. Indeed, while Americans were all but convinced that Iraq threatened their safety and security, it was actually the

U.S. government that was threatening Iraqis.

Far from posing an imminent threat to the United States, in 2003, Iraq was a country that had already been devastated by a U.S.-led war a decade earlier and crippling economic sanctions that caused the deaths of 1.5 million Iraqis (leading to the resignation of two UN humanitarian coordinators who called the sanctions genocidal).

Threats and Bluster

Although the invasion didn't officially begin until March 20, 2003 (still the 19th in Washington), the United States had been explicitly threatening to attack the country as early as January 2003, with the Pentagon publicizing plans for a so-called "shock and awe" bombing campaign.

"If the Pentagon sticks to its current war plan," CBS News reported on January 24, "one day in March the Air Force and Navy will launch between 300 and 400 cruise missiles at targets in Iraq. ... [T]his is more than the number that were launched during the entire 40 days of the first Gulf War. On the second day, the plan calls for launching another 300 to 400 cruise missiles."

A Pentagon official warned: "There will not be a safe place in Baghdad."

These public threats appeared to be a form of intimidation and psychological warfare, and were almost certainly in violation of the UN Charter, which states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

The Pentagon's vaunted "shock and awe" attack began with limited bombing on March 19-20, as U.S. forces unsuccessfully attempted to kill Hussein. Attacks continued against a small number of targets until March 21, when the main bombing campaign began. U.S.-led forces launched approximately 1,700 air sorties, with 504 using cruise missiles.

During the invasion, the U.S. also dropped some 10,800 cluster bombs on Iraq despite claiming that only a fraction of that number had been used.

"The Pentagon presented a misleading picture during the war of the extent to which cluster weapons were being used and of the civilian casualties they were causing," reported *USA Today* in late 2003. Despite claims that only 1,500 cluster weapons had been used resulting in just one civilian casualty, "in fact, the United States used 10,782 cluster weapons," including many that were fired into urban areas from late March to early April 2003.

The cluster bombs killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians and left behind thousands of unexploded bomblets that continued to kill and injure civilians weeks after the fighting stopped.

(Because of the indiscriminate effect of these weapons, their use is banned by the international Convention on Cluster Munitions, which the United States has refused to sign.)

Attempting to kill Hussein, Bush ordered the bombing of an Iraqi residential restaurant on April 7. A single B-1B bomber dropped four precision-guided 2,000-pound bombs. The four bunker-penetrating bombs destroyed the target building, the al Saa restaurant block and several surrounding structures, leaving a 60-foot crater and unknown casualties.

Diners, including children, were ripped apart by the bombs. One mother found her daughter's torso and then her severed head. U.S. intelligence later confirmed that Hussein wasn't there.

Resistance and Torture

It was evident within weeks of the initial invasion that the Bush administration had misjudged the critical question of whether Iraqis would fight. They put up stiffer than expected resistance even in southern Iraqi cities such as Umm Qasr, Basra and Nasiriya where Hussein's support was considered weak, and soon after the fall of the regime on April 9, when the Bush administration decided to disband the Iraqi army, it helped spark an anti-U.S. insurgency led by many former Iraqi military figures.

Despite Bush's triumphant May 1 landing on an aircraft carrier and his speech in front of a giant "Mission Accomplished" banner, it looked as though the collapse of the Baathist government had been just the first stage in what would become a long-running war of attrition. After the Iraqi conventional forces had been disbanded, the U.S. military began to notice in May 2003 a steadily increasing flurry of attacks on U.S. occupiers in various regions of the so-called "Sunni Triangle."

These included groups of insurgents firing assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades at U.S. occupation troops, as well as increasing use of improvised explosive devices on U.S. convoys.

Possibly anticipating a long, drawn-out occupation and counter-insurgency campaign, in a March 2003 memorandum Bush administration lawyers devised legal doctrines to justify certain torture techniques, offering legal rationales "that could render specific conduct, otherwise criminal, not unlawful."

They argued that the president or anyone acting on the president's orders were not bound by U.S. laws or international treaties prohibiting torture, asserting that the need for "obtaining intelligence vital to the protection of untold thousands of American citizens" superseded any obligations the administration had under domestic or international law.

"In order to respect the President's inherent constitutional authority to manage a military campaign," the memo stated, U.S. prohibitions against torture "must be construed as inapplicable to interrogations undertaken pursuant to his Commander-in-Chief authority."

Over the course of the next year, disclosures emerged that torture had been used extensively in Iraq for "intelligence gathering." Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh disclosed in The New Yorker in May 2004 that a 53-page classified Army report written by Gen. Antonio Taguba concluded that Abu Ghraib prison's military police were urged on by intelligence officers seeking to break down the Iraqis before interrogation.

"Numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees," wrote Taguba.

These actions, authorized at the highest levels, constituted serious breaches of international and domestic law, including the Convention Against Torture, the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners of War, as well as the U.S. War Crimes Act and the Torture Statute.

They also may have played a role in the rise of the ISIS terror group, the origins of which were subsequently traced to an American prison in Iraq dubbed Camp Bucca. This camp was the site of rampant abuse of prisoners, one of whom, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, later became the leader of ISIS. Al-Baghdadi spent four years as a prisoner at Bucca, where he started recruiting others to his cause.

America's Weapons of Mass Destruction

Besides torture and the use of cluster bombs, the crimes against the Iraqi people over the years included wholesale massacres, long-term poisoning and the destruction of cities.

There was the 2004 assault on Fallujah in which white phosphorus – banned under international law – was used against civilians. There was the 2005 Haditha massacre, in which 24 unarmed civilians were systematically murdered by U.S. marines. There was the 2007 "Collateral Murder" massacre revealed by WikiLeaks in 2010, depicting the indiscriminate killing of more than a dozen civilians in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad – including two Reuters news staff.

There is also the tragic legacy of cancer and birth defects caused by the U.S. military's extensive use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus. In Fallujah the use of depleted uranium led to birth defects in infants 14 times higher than in the Japanese cities targeted by U.S. atomic bombs at close of World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Noting the birth defects in Fallujah, Al Jazeera journalist Dahr Jamail told Democracy Now in 2013:

"And going on to Fallujah, because I wrote about this a year ago, and then I returned to the city again this trip, we are seeing an absolute crisis of congenital malformations of newborn. ... I mean, these are extremely hard to look at. They're extremely hard to bear witness to. But it's something that we all need to pay attention to, because of the amount of depleted uranium used by the U.S. military during both of their brutal attacks on the city of 2004, as well as other toxic munitions like white phosphorus, among other things."

A report sent to the UN General Assembly by Dr. Nawal Majeed Al-Sammarai, Iraq's Minister of Women's Affairs, stated that in September 2009, Fallujah General Hospital had 170 babies born, 75 percent of whom were deformed. A quarter of them died within their first week of life.

The military's use of depleted uranium also caused a sharp increase in Leukemia and birth defects in the city of Najaf, which saw one of the most severe military actions during the 2003 invasion, with cancer becoming more common than the flu according to local doctors.

By the end of the war, a number of Iraq's major cities, including Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul, had been reduced to rubble and by 2014, a former CIA director conceded that the nation of Iraq had basically been destroyed.

"I think Iraq has pretty much ceased to exist," said Michael Hayden, noting that it was fragmented into multiple parts which he didn't see "getting back together." In other words, the United States, using its own extensive arsenal of actual weapons of mass destruction, had completely destroyed a sovereign nation.

Predictable Consequences

The effects of these policies included the predictable growth of Islamic extremism, with a National Intelligence Estimate – representing the consensus view of the 16 spy services inside the U.S. government – warning in 2006 that a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was being spawned by the U.S. occupation of Iraq. According to one American intelligence official, the consensus was that "the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse."

The assessment noted that several underlying factors were "fueling the spread of the jihadist movement," including "entrenched grievances, such as corruption,

injustice, and fear of Western domination, leading to anger, humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness,” and “pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment among most Muslims all of which jihadists exploit.”

But rather than leading to substantive changes or reversals in U.S. policies, the strategy agreed upon in Washington seemed to be to double down on the failed policies that had given rise to radical jihadist groups. In fact, instead of withdrawing from Iraq, the U.S. decided to send a surge of 20,000 troops in 2007. This is despite the fact that public opinion was decidedly against the war.

A Newsweek poll in early 2007 found that 68 percent of Americans opposed the surge, and in another poll conducted just after Bush’s 2007 State of the Union Address, 64 percent said Congress was not being assertive enough in challenging the Bush administration over its conduct of the war.

An estimated half-million people marched on Washington on Jan. 27, 2007, with messages for the newly sworn in 110th Congress to “Stand up to Bush,” urging Congress to cut the war funding with the slogan, “Not one more dollar, not one more death.” A growing combativeness was also on display in the antiwar movement with this demonstration marked by hundreds of protesters breaking through police lines and charging Capitol Hill.

Although there were additional large-scale protests a couple months later to mark the sixth anniversary of the invasion, including a march on the Pentagon led by Iraq War veterans, over the next year the antiwar movement’s activities steadily declined. While fatigue might explain some of the waning support for mass mobilizations, much of the decline can also surely be explained by the rise of Barack Obama’s candidacy. Millions of people channeled their energies into his campaign, including many motivated by a hope that he represented real change from the Bush years.

One of Obama’s advantages over Clinton in the Democratic primary was that he had been an early opponent of the Iraq War while she had been one of its most vocal supporters. This led many American voters to believe in 2008 that they had elected someone who might rein in some of the U.S. military adventurism and quickly end U.S. involvement in Iraq. But this wasn’t to be the case. The combat mission dragged on well into President Obama’s first term.

War, War and More War

After its well-publicized failures in Iraq, the U.S. turned its attention to Libya, overthrowing the government of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 utilizing armed militias implicated in war crimes and backed with NATO air power. Following

Gaddafi's ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The Obama administration also took a keen interest in destabilizing the Syrian government and to do so began providing arms that often fell into the hands of extremists.

The CIA trained and armed so-called "moderate" rebel units in Syria, only to watch these groups switch sides by joining forces with Islamist brigades such as ISIS and Al Qaeda's affiliate the Nusra Front. Others surrendered to Sunni extremist groups with the U.S.-provided weapons presumably ending up in the arsenals of jihadists or sometimes just quit or went missing altogether.

Beyond Syria and Libya, Obama also expanded U.S. military engagements in countries including Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and sent a surge of troops to Afghanistan in 2009. And despite belatedly withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq, with the last U.S. troops finally leaving on December 18, 2011, Obama also presided over a major increase in the use of drone strikes and conventional air wars.

In his first term, Obama dropped 20,000 bombs and missiles, a number that shot up to over 100,000 bombs and missiles dropped in his second term. In 2016, the final year of Obama's presidency, the U.S. dropped nearly three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day.

Obama also had the distinction of becoming the fourth U.S. president in a row to bomb the nation of Iraq. Under criticism for allowing the rise of ISIS in the country, Obama decided to reverse his earlier decision to disengage with Iraq, and in 2014 started bombing the country again. Addressing the American people on Sept. 10, 2014, President Obama said that "ISIL poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East including American citizens, personnel and facilities."

"If left unchecked," he continued, "these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States. While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies."

Of course, this is precisely the result that many voices of caution had warned about back in 2002 and 2003, when millions of Americans were taking to the streets in protest of the looming invasion of Iraq. And, to be clear, it wasn't just the antiwar left urging restraint – establishment figures and paleoconservatives were also voicing concern.

Retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, for example, who served as a Middle East envoy for George W. Bush, warned in October 2002 that by invading Iraq, "we are about to

do something that will ignite a fuse in this region that we will rue the day we ever started.” Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser in the first Bush administration, said a strike on Iraq “could unleash an Armageddon in the Middle East.”

No matter, Bush was a gut player who had made up his mind, so those warnings were brushed aside and the invasion proceeded.

Campaign 2016

When presidential candidate Donald Trump began slamming Bush for the Iraq War during the Republican primary campaign in 2015 and 2016, calling the decision to invade Iraq a “big fat mistake,” he not only won over some of the antiwar libertarian vote, but also helped solidify his image as a political outsider who “tells it like it is.”

And after Hillary Clinton emerged as the Democratic nominee, with her track record as an enthusiastic backer of virtually all U.S. interventions and an advocate of deeper involvement in countries such as Syria, voters could have been forgiven for getting the impression that the Republican Party was now the antiwar party and the Democrats were the hawks.

As the late Robert Parry observed in June 2016, “Amid the celebrations about picking the first woman as a major party’s presumptive nominee, Democrats appear to have given little thought to the fact that they have abandoned a near half-century standing as the party more skeptical about the use of military force. Clinton is an unabashed war hawk who has shown no inclination to rethink her pro-war attitudes.”

The antiwar faction within the Democratic Party was further marginalized during the Democratic National Convention when chants of “No More War” broke out during former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta’s speech. The Democratic establishment responded with chants of “USA!” to drown out the voices for peace and they even turned the lights out on the antiwar section of the crowd. The message was clear: there is no room for the antiwar movement inside the Democratic Party.

While there were numerous factors that played a role in Trump’s stunning victory over Clinton in November 2016, it is no stretch of the imagination to speculate that one of those factors was lingering antiwar sentiment from the Iraq debacle and other engagements of the U.S. military. Many of those fed up with U.S. military adventurism may have fallen for Trump’s quasi-anti-interventionist rhetoric while others may have opted to vote for an alternative party such as the Libertarians or the Greens, both of which took strong stances against U.S. interventionism.

But despite Trump's occasional statements questioning the wisdom of committing the military to far-off lands such as Iraq or Afghanistan, he was also an advocate for war crimes such as "taking out [the] families" of suspected terrorists. He urged that the U.S. stop being "politically correct" in its waging of war.

So, ultimately, Americans were confronted with choosing between an unreconstructed regime-changing neoconservative Democratic hawk, and a reluctant interventionist who nevertheless wanted to teach terrorists a lesson by killing their children. Although ultimately the neocon won the popular vote, the war crimes advocate carried the Electoral College.

Following the election it turned out that Trump was a man of his word when it came to killing children. In one of his first military actions as president, Trump ordered an attack on a village in Yemen on Jan. 29, 2017, which claimed the lives of as many as 23 civilians, including a newborn baby and an eight-year-old girl, Nawar al-Awlaki.

Nawar was the daughter of the al-Qaeda propagandist and American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a September 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen.

Normalized Aggression

2017, Trump's first year in office, turned out to be the deadliest year for civilians in Iraq and Syria since U.S. airstrikes began on the two countries in 2014. The U.S. killed between 3,923 and 6,102 civilians during the year, according to a tally by the monitoring group Airwars. "Non-combatant deaths from Coalition air and artillery strikes rose by more than 200 per cent compared to 2016," Airwars noted.

While this spike in civilian deaths did make some headlines, including in the *Washington Post*, for the most part, the thousands of innocents killed by U.S. airstrikes are dismissed as "collateral damage." The ongoing carnage is considered perfectly normal, barely even eliciting a comment from the pundit class.

This is arguably one of the most enduring legacies of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – an act of military aggression that was based on false pretenses, which brushed aside warnings of caution, and blatantly violated international law. With no one in the media or the Bush administration ever held accountable for promoting this war or for launching it, what we have seen is the normalization of military aggression to a level that would have been unimaginable 20 years ago.

Indeed, I remember well the bombing of Iraq that took place in 1998 as part of Bill Clinton's Operation Desert Fox. Although this was a very limited bombing

campaign, lasting only four days, there were sizable protests in opposition to the military action. I joined a picket of a couple hundred people in front of the White House holding a hand-made sign reading “IMPEACH HIM FOR WAR CRIMES” – a reference to the fact that Congress was at the time impeaching him for lying about a blowjob.

Compare that to what we see today – or, more accurately what we don’t see today – in regards to antiwar advocacy. Despite the fact that the U.S. is now engaged in at least seven military conflicts, there is little in the way of peace activism or even much of a national debate over the wisdom, legality or morality of waging war. Few even raise objections to its significant financial cost to U.S. taxpayers, for example the fact that one day of spending on these wars amounts to about \$200 million.

Fifteen years ago, one of the arguments of the antiwar movement was that the war on terror was morphing into a perpetual war without boundaries, without rules, and without any end game. The U.S., in other words, was in danger of finding itself in a state of endless war.

We are now clearly embroiled in that endless war, which is a reality that even Senate war hawk Lindsey Graham acknowledged last year when four U.S. troops were killed in Niger. Claiming that he didn’t know that the U.S. had a military presence in Niger, Graham – who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs – stated that “this is an endless war without boundaries, no limitation on time or geography.”

Although it wasn’t clear whether he was lamenting or celebrating this endless and borderless war, his words should be taken as a warning of where the U.S. stands on this 15th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq – in a war without end, without boundaries, without limits on time or geography.

Acceptable Bigotry and Scapegoating of Russia

Exclusive: The scapegoating of Russia has taken on an air of bigotry and ugliness, based largely on Cold War-era stereotypes. In this article, Natylie Baldwin counters this intolerance with some of her positive impressions having traveled the country extensively.

By Natylie Baldwin

Over the last year and a half, Americans have been bombarded with the Gish Gallop claims of Russiagate. In that time, the most reckless comments have been made against the Russians in service of using that country as a scapegoat for problems in the United States that were coming to a head, which were the real reasons for Donald Trump's upset victory in 2016. It has even gotten to the point where irrational hatred against Russia is becoming normalized, with the usual organizations that like to warn of the pernicious consequences of bigotry silent.

The first time I realized how low things would likely get was when Ruth Marcus, deputy editor of the *Washington Post*, sent out the following tweet in March of 2017, squealing with delight at the thought of a new Cold War with the world's other nuclear superpower: "So excited to be watching *The Americans*, throwback to a simpler time when everyone considered Russia the enemy. Even the president."



Not only did Marcus's comment imply that it was great for the U.S. to have an enemy, but it specifically implied that there was something particularly great about that enemy being Russia.

Since then, the public discourse has only gotten nastier. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper – who notoriously perjured himself before Congress about warrantless spying on Americans – stated on Meet the Press last May that Russians were uniquely and "genetically" predisposed toward manipulative political activities. If Clapper or anyone else in the public eye had made such a statement about Muslims, Arabs, Iranians, Jews, Israelis, Chinese or just about any other group, there would have been some push-back about the prejudice that it reflected and how it didn't correspond with enlightened liberal values. But Clapper's comment passed with hardly a peep of protest.

More recently, John Sipher, a retired CIA station chief who reportedly spent years in Russia – although at what point in time is unclear – was interviewed in Jane Mayer's recent New Yorker piece trying to spin the Steele Dossier as somehow legitimate. On March 6, Sipher took to Twitter with the following comment: "How can one not be a Russophobe? Russia soft power is political warfare. Hard power is invading neighbors, hiding the death of civilians with chemical weapons and threatening with doomsday nuclear weapons. And they kill the opposition at home. Name something positive."

In fairness to Sipher, he did backpedal somewhat after being challenged; however, the fact that his unfiltered blabbering reveals such a deep antipathy toward Russians (“How can one not be a Russophobe?”) and an initial assumption that he could get away with saying it publicly is troubling.

Glenn Greenwald re-tweeted with a comment asking if Russians would soon acceptably be referred to as “rats and roaches.” Another person replied with: “Because they are rats and roaches. What’s the problem?”

This is just a small sampling of the anti-Russian comments and attitudes that pass, largely unremarked upon, in our media landscape.

There are, of course, the larger institutional influencers of culture doing their part to push anti-Russian bigotry in this already contentious atmosphere. *Red Sparrow*, both the book and the movie, detail the escapades of a female Russian spy. The story propagates the continued fetishization of Russian women based on the stereotype that they’re all hot and frisky. Furthermore, all those who work in Russian intelligence are evil and backwards rather than possibly being motivated by some kind of patriotism, while all the American intel agents are paragons of virtue and seem like they just stepped out of an ad for Nick at Nite’s How to be Swell.

The recent Academy Awards continued their politically motivated trend of awarding Oscars for best documentary to films on topics that just happen to coalesce nicely with Washington’s latest adversarial policy. Last year it was the *White Helmets* film to support the regime change meme in Syria. This year it’s *Icarus* about the doping scandal in Russia.

Similarly, *Loveless*, the new film by Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev (director of *Leviathan*) is being reviewed – as Catherine Brown points out – by writers from the mainstream American media in a predictably biased fashion. The film focuses on the disintegration of a married Moscow couple’s relationship and the complicated web of factors involved which have tragic ramifications for the couple’s 12-year old son.

American reviewers manage to paint the factors detailed in the film that are prevalent in most modern capitalist cities (e.g. being self-centered, materialistic and preoccupied with technological gadgets) as somehow uniquely Russian sins. They also ignore a prominent character in the film that defies their negativity about modern Russia – a character that represents altruism and the growth of civil society in the country.

A common theme in all this is that Russia is a bad country and Russians can’t help but be a bunch of good-for-nothings at best and dangerous deviants at

worst. Indeed, according to media depictions, sometimes they manage to be both at the same time. But what they don't manage to be is positive, constructive or even complicated. Sipher knows that the average American has been deluged with this anti-Russian prejudice, as reflected in his challenge at the end of his initial tweet about the largest country, geographically at least, in the world: Name something positive.

Countering the Negative

Most people know, at least in the abstract, that few individuals or groups are purely good or bad. Most are a complex combination of both. But many – including those who normally consider themselves to be open-minded liberals – have allowed their lizard brains to be triggered by the constant demonization of Russia in the hopes of taking down Trump whom they deem to be a disproportionate threat to everything they hold dear. So as a counterweight to all the negative constantly pumped out about Russia and to take Sipher up on his challenge, I will list some positive things about Russia and the contribution of the country and its people to the world.

Contemporary Russia's Domestic Policy

Russia has one of the most educated populations in the world, universal health care for its people, a home ownership rate of 84%, strong gun control laws, no death penalty, 140 days of guaranteed maternity leave for women at 100% salary, and Moscow was just voted the 4th safest megacity in the world for women.

And, despite claims that are often repeated in corporate media and even by many in the alternative press, Russia has independent and critical voices in the print media. Even on television, which is heavily influenced by the Kremlin, the Western position is often given airtime by either pro-Western Russian critics or Westerners themselves. During both of my visits to Russia (in 2015 and 2017) I interviewed a cross-section of Russians who all confirmed that they had access to Western media through both satellite and the internet. Furthermore, while violence against journalists is a concern, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, journalist murders have decreased significantly under Putin compared to the era of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s.

Am I saying that Russia is a utopia without any problems? No. Like most countries, it has plenty. Most Russians, including Putin, admit this. These problems include still significant poverty rates, comparatively low productivity and life expectancy, and corruption. But it is important to note the direction of trends, which are mostly positive since Putin took over. Under his leadership, poverty rates have been cut in half, life expectancy has increased by several years – especially among men who had suffered the worst mortality

crisis since WWII, crime has dropped, pensions have increased and are paid regularly, the unemployment rate has been around 5% for years, great investments in infrastructure and agriculture have been seen along with development throughout the country.

And that development has not just been seen in Moscow and St. Petersburg – the latter city which, by the way, culturally and architecturally rivals those in France and Italy.

There are plenty of medium-sized cities throughout Russia that are becoming well-developed and culturally engaging. As one example, during my 2015 trip, I visited Krasnodar, located in the Black Sea region. The rate of civic construction in the city during 2014 surpassed even Moscow. As a consequence of the challenges of this rapid development, the public felt that decisions were not being made with sufficient feedback from residents, several of whom got together and created a group called the Public Council which eventually found ways to get city authorities to listen to their concerns.

The group had received significant media attention, networked with youth groups and infrastructure specialists, and received foreign experts in urban planning, public arts, transportation and city marketing. They have also organized periodic clean-up and renovation days, which are sponsored by local businesses that donate use of equipment. Currently, they are working on the creation of protected green zones, including one that connects all of the city's hiking paths and another to connect its 16 lakes. They have received no opposition from the Russian government and have elicited the interest of other cities who want to model their approach to local issues.

While in Krasnodar I met a dozen or more professionals, from lawyers to engineers and doctors, who lived in the city and were part of another civic group engaged in charitable, conservation and youth programs. At one point, I took a walking tour of the city. In terms of architecture, I saw the old and the new side by side, including a large shopping center that was built around a large tower that had been there for generations that local residents saved from destruction by the mall planners, a square with controversial fountains, and a main thoroughfare that was closed to auto traffic, allowing pedestrians free reign. Couples – including some of mixed race, parents pushing baby strollers, and bicyclists – all wound their way through the streets as both Russian and American music was piped in and building walls on one side of the street for a stretch displayed delicate illustrations of Russian history.

Fifteen hundred miles away in the Ural mountain region, the city of Yekaterinburg – named after Catherine I – has the infamous distinction of being the place where Czar Nicholas II and his family were massacred by the Bolsheviks

in 1918. On the site where the family's bodies were exhumed, a magnificent Russian Orthodox Church has been erected and dedicated to the last royal family. Nearby is the Yeltsin Library, denoting the Russian Federation's first President, although his legacy is not popular in Russia today.

The city is also home to a wide variety of precious metals and gems, along with a thriving economy. According to Sharon Tennison, an independent program coordinator who has traveled there numerous times over the past 15 years, hundreds of new apartment blocks can be seen on the outskirts of the city to accommodate the recent economic and population growth.

Yekaterinburg has a bustling cultural life that includes an opera house, a ballet, numerous theaters and museums, as well as dozens of libraries. In this respect, the city has continued its preoccupation with the classical arts as in Catherine's period. At the same time, many modern Russian rock bands with a distinctive sound have formed there (known as Ural rock).

The city also has a low rate of violence and crime.

As the New York Times and NPR like to point out and generalize out from, there are some rural and industrial areas in Russia that still need attention and investment. However, there are other towns in the countryside that are doing well.

Russia's Contributions to the World

Russia has made many cultural and humanitarian contributions to the world. In the 18th and 19th centuries, imperial Russia produced some of the most renowned figures in the world of arts. These include writers, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, whose works are often cited by American readers as among the greatest of all time; great composers include Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff.

The country also has a rich history of pre-Soviet philosophers who debated questions of politics, history, spirituality and meaning. One of the most famous is Vladimir Solovyev, classified as belonging to the Slavophile school but distinguished from his fellow Slavophiles by his openness to and integration of several lines of thought.

He acknowledged the intuitive as well as the rational. He was friends with Dostoyevsky but had disagreements over Orthodoxy since Solovyev was an advocate of ecumenism and healing the schism between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Furthermore, he is credited with influencing Nicolai Berdyaev, Rudolf Steiner and the Russian Symbolists, among others. He admired the Greek goddess Sophia who he characterized as the "merciful unifying feminine wisdom of God." Solovyev

was adept at integrating several spiritual strands, such as Greek philosophy, Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Christian Gnosticism.

Solovyev was famous for his debates with Slavophile contemporary, Nicolai Fedorov. In these and other writings, questions about morality and technological progress, how much humans should control nature, and prioritizing which problems to invest man's resources in solving were all given great consideration by Solovyev and are still relevant today, in both Russian society and the larger world.

It is interesting to note that, of all the early Slavophile philosophers, Putin chose Solovyev, the one who was the least strident and most open to the synthesis of differing values and viewpoints, as part of his assignment of books for Russia's regional governors to read a few years back. Of course, that didn't stop several western pundits – who showed they knew virtually nothing of Solovyev but perhaps some cherry-picked and out-of-context tidbits they'd found online – from distorting his writings, which naturally had to be horrible because Putin recommended them.

Moving on to the 20th century, it should not be forgotten that the Soviet Union bore the brunt of defeating the Nazis during WWII, losing 27 million people, and saw a third of their country destroyed in the process.

In the 21st century, Russia provided significant aid to Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. They also provided safe transport to Yemeni-Americans out of that devastated country after the U.S. State Department effectively abandoned them in 2015. Russia provided medical aid to 60,000 people affected by the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014. Last September, Russia provided 35 tons of aid to earthquake victims in Mexico.

For someone who spent years in Russia as a professional expert working for the U.S. intelligence community, John Sipher is either not well-informed on his subject or is intentionally being disingenuous when it comes to the suggestion that Russia has done nothing positive, whether under Putin's governance or before.

The Purpose of Scapegoating Russia

In early 2017, journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes published a book called *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign*. Largely based on interviews with insiders from Hillary Clinton's failed 2016 presidential campaign, the book was an attempt to analyze why she lost. The insiders agreed that Clinton had trouble providing a plausible explanation to voters as to why she was running other than that she simply wanted to be president. They also

noted her trouble connecting with average Americans and her failure to campaign in certain rust belt areas that Trump ultimately got support in. The book also states that within 24 hours of Clinton's loss, members of her campaign had decided to home in on the excuse of "Russian interference" to explain away her humiliating defeat.

In addition to a bloc of Clinton's supporters continuing to push this excuse for her loss and the ratings motive that channels like CNN and MSNBC have in continuing to milk the scandal, there is also Robert Mueller's investigation which has dragged on for over a year.

The most notable thing about the Mueller investigation to anyone who takes a sober look at it is its constantly evolving purpose. First, the purpose of the investigation was to find any evidence to support the allegation that Russia had hacked into the DNC's emails. When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation, the purpose evolved into collusion between Trump and Russia to steal the election on behalf of Trump.

When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation, the purpose evolved yet again into Russia influencing the election on behalf of Trump, possibly without his knowledge or participation. When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation and all that could be found was a paltry number of social media ad buys – many of which were purchased after the election or advocated conflicting positions or didn't even have anything to do with the election, the purpose became "sowing discord."

After all of this, we have an indictment against 13 private individuals who worked for a "troll farm" that had been exposed several years ago and is run by a caterer with no proven orchestration by Putin or the Kremlin. Mueller also knows that this indictment will never be legally tested because the 13 individuals will never be extradited and stand trial.

After all the shrieking and howling 24/7 for close to a year and a half that Trump was an illegitimate president installed by the Kremlin, this is the best Mueller and the mainstream Democrats can come up with. It's pretty obvious by now that this investigation has simply been feeding into the media and Democratic Party circus mentioned above rather than uncovering anything substantive with which to impeach Trump.

The 2016 election showed that the Democrats faced a sleeping giant that had been awakened – one that the Democratic Party had helped to create for decades by enabling lower living standards, outsourcing of good-paying jobs, the proliferation of low-wage jobs, unaffordable education, lack of health care coverage, public health problems, and decrepit infrastructure.

Consequently, there was a demand for meaningful policies that would help average Americans, policies that polls show they want. But mainstream Democrats will not deliver on such policies, like \$15/hour minimum wage, Medicare for All, and pulling out of our wars and investing the money saved in jobs and infrastructure. They won't deliver on these things for the same reason that Republicans won't deliver on them: because their donors don't want them to. But they are not going to admit that to the American people who were going to keep demanding, so they needed a scapegoat and a diversion.

It's a cheap trick that the political elite is using to appeal to the basest instincts of their fellow Americans while shoring up support for their most reckless tendencies in the area of foreign policy.

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